ZADELLIN
ORIGINS
ed. Aristide Twain, Theta Mandel, & Ostara Gale

Zadellin:
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Featuring stories by
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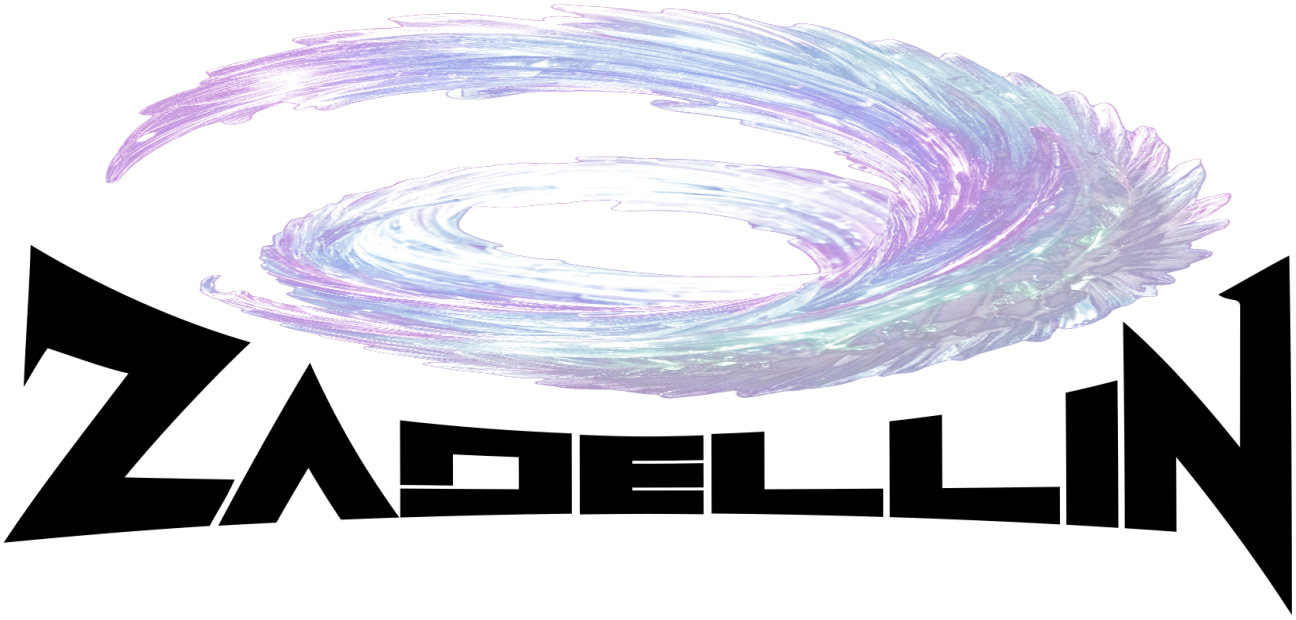

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The Shrinking Dark

Shemhazai

By Ostara Gale & Aristide Twain
Edited by Theta Mandel & Aristide Twain

It was the dead of night, and the bells rang silent in the Watchtower. Make no mistake, the bells did *ring*, but naught but the silence followed. That was the way Shemhazai preferred it; appearances mattered, but when it came to keeping track of time, a being like herself had no need for anything so crude as air vibrations.

In any case, the planet of the Lightbringers didn't have a proper day-night cycle. They said this had been set up as a defence against a certain contingent of the Lightbringers' proto-historical adversaries. The dark would shrink into a circle, trapping the heliophobes within. Or so the theory went. It hadn't had cause to be tested in a length of time that was mind-boggling even to one who thought a span of centuries to be a mere trifle.

Yet Shemhazai did not stand in the Celestial Fortress; *her* office occupied the top floor of the tallest tower of Watch Station 615. The Station was a Fortress unto itself, in orbit around the planetary cradle of the Lightbringers. And this was the golden hour when the magnificent construct would briefly drift over the city where she had spent her first few centuries of life, covering it with an altogether different shade.

She'd always had a thing for high places. It was from the summit of Mount Krahl that she'd watched, like so many, as her world streaked through timelines like a shooting star, returning to life from the long, long dream that had followed the War. Standing by the crystal windows of her office, Shemhazai could gaze upon the beauty overhead, the grand simplicity of her ancestors' great Creation; the cold, circling dance of stars was as beautiful as when it had first been set aspin. But most of all, she gloried in what she saw down below — in that inebriating feeling of standing higher than Heaven itself.

To her underlings, the Watchers bound to her in service, she was simply *the Boss*. But she *thought* of herself as Shemhazai; a private name, known to few, used by fewer, but *chosen*, and as such, meaningful. The original Shemhazai was an ancient figure, ancient in a race of immortals. She went all the way back to the earliest times, the fledgling years of the Universe and the Lightbringers'

dominion. Shemhazai the Wise had been there when the First Flame was lit; she'd had commerce with Mappers, witnessed the wars and rebellions.

Yet Shemhazai had not been a Founder, in the conventional sense. Good thing, too. To the woman on the topmost deck of Watch Station 615, Founder-worship was trite and hollow. In fact, it was the legacy of the Founders, with their uncompromising quest for total, pre-ordained control, which had landed their children *in* this mess. True leadership, in the Watch's opinion, must be an ongoing project, fluid, adaptable; even a clockwork universe needed to be cranked and oiled up if you expected it to run for all eternity. To gamble otherwise was, in the total timescale, to court oblivion.

Shemhazai, if certain writings were true, had been among the first of the ancient Lightbringers to understand *that*. She'd been a founding member, not of the ruling elite, but of the shadow operators, the factions who would intervene within and without as they saw fit, acting upon and adjusting the raw numbers and geometries which their wide-eyed brethren released with such insouciance into the firmament, naked and shivering. To know of Shemhazai was to know of the Mathematical Bureau, and that was itself a privilege, not to mention proof of cunning and courage. Such knowledge was never given; it had to be pursued, discovered, stolen if need be. Only then could there be recruitment.

But to *become* Shemhazai, the Shemhazai of a new age… Well, some would have called it hubris. Yet these were strange times, changed times, when everything old was new again. Down on that world beneath her feet, God was back on His throne — or so He claimed.

God. Shemhazai scoffed at the moniker, breaking the stillness of her stoic reverie for just a moment. The current Lord Regnant was no 'God'. He *claimed* to be the Lord Founder, the original Supreme Being, Urizen himself, reembodied after all this time. *Yeah, right*. And she was the lawfully wedded consort of Yog-Sothoth. An obvious lie, oh yes — but if the world believed *that*, what else could they be made to swallow? If any old fool could hobble out of a mausoleum and declare himself the Creator reborn, why *shouldn't* Shemhazai return?

So. Shemhazai. Shemhazai returned, Shemhazai reclaimed, Shemhazai reincarnated. Here she stood, and *honni soit qui mal y pense*.

From the Watch Station, she beheld Creation.

From the Watch Station, she beheld the Fortress of History, that gleaming, ancient machine in its tidy crystal snowglobe.

From the Watch Station, she beheld the efforts of that pesky secretary, Jillianxyeremos. There she went, scurrying up and down the corridors, no doubt engaged in some facet of her quixotic quest to "protect the rights of each Watcher".

'What a load of baloney,' as they said on Sol Three. Rights were for mortals. Archons had *duties*. Archons had *purposes*. Some were made to serve, and others to command; chronogenetic predestination, woven into their very essence with magic and mathematics. In that respect, at least, the Founders' clockwork legacy endured. Unless they Fell outright, no Archon's lot in life would be beneath or beyond them; it was a material impossibility. They were, all of them, precisely where they belonged. Any bleeding-hearts campaign to soften the lives of the rank-and-file was futile heresy, doomed, by the same token, to failure.

Still, Jillian had her part, and her Boss would see to it that it was fulfilled, whatever the girl strove for. The chances that she would engage in true rebellion were insignificant; the chance that such a thing would succeed was null.

And there was so much more to watch. Soldiers and architects breaking bread in the fields around the Fortress, brought together in common purpose as they laboured to rebuild the estates and manor-houses to their former glory, where centuries of War had left only dust.

She watched, and what she saw was this: the whole world was changing. It thought it was simply healing, restoring itself, undoing the damage; but Shemhazai knew better. You couldn't build the same House twice; Time moved ever forward. That was how their ancestors had wired the damn thing, and it applied even to their own planet.

The question, then, was who would take advantage of the inevitable transformations — who would direct the currents of change, and in what direction. And here she was, poised to answer that question with a single letter.

How had she come to be there? She cast her mind back to the time before. Before she'd become Chair of Watch Station 615. In fact, the memory which presented itself to her vagabond consciousness, as the Station's shadow slowly left the golden circle of the Fortress and brushed against the edge of that greater shadow, the slowly shrinking night-time — that memory was her recollection of the first time she'd set foot in the place.

Some years ago, a woman had been welcomed aboard by a Representative of Providence, the Selector of Watch Chairs. She wasn't the Boss yet, in those days; nor did she dare to call herself Shemhazai outwith her own mind. What had she thought, on that fateful day, the silent, blank-faced woman? Mainly, as she recalled, that the Selector was… *odd*, to put it mildly. But she was not about to turn down an offer from On High just because the Man Upstairs was a bit eccentric. Not when his interest in her seemed more than an ordinary staffing; when he kept whispering about "acts of personal Providence"...

Even before he introduced himself, she'd been under no illusion that she could possibly be dealing with the Watch's Celestial-in-Chief. The Provident himself, sitting in his ivory tower, twiddling his little thumbs, was hardly likely to care one way or the other who filled a position like hers. There were, after all, she had been told, six hundred and fourteen Stations ranked ahead of this one. All alike, courtesy of the Multiplication. As for its position in orbit around the Morning Star itself, it was not, by intent, a mark of importance. A spy who stayed home was a spy on the bench. If you had to put it in crudely human terms, picture James Bond assigned to a treehouse in the gardens of Buckingham Palace.

If the treehouse had been provided by the FBI, that was. Shemhazai hadn't thought much of the fact when she'd first heard it, but it was strange, now, to think that her beloved Station was an nth-generation copy of some ancient

template — especially one provided by the Agents of Providence's longstanding rivals at the Mathematical Bureau.

Then again, it went to show. Dichotomies were for the lesser species. Watchmen and Operators could work together, if necessary; to picture them forever at each other's throats, each interventionist faction distracting the other from worthier pursuits, was an easy myth to believe, and it had been carefully fed for just that purpose to the broader Archonic intelligentsia. If they must know of the secret powers that moved in their midst, let the rabble chuckle and tut and believe them quite harmless.

Oh yes — however many precautions were taken, it was inevitable that rumours of the Watch and the Bureau should trickle into the noosphere of the more clued-in segments of Lightbringer society. Shemhazai herself had grown up in the House of Narthmor, whose every room was adorned with paintings commemorating the glorious deeds of Watchers past; such was the investment of an old Providential bloodline in the task of secret-keeping.

Not that the artwork gave much away that had strategic value; even if the Watch's history had remained stable, which it hardly ever did, there was more propaganda than fact to those painted icons, and more than one spurious conflation. Shemhazai still remembered the night she'd realised that a certain ancient tapestry, obtained at considerable expense by the Patrician and hung in the Vestry with much fanfare, depicted not the founding of the Watch, but the ordination of the Bureau. She remembered the Patrician's rage, the punishment he'd inflicted on the impertinent girl. She remembered her bitterness, and the lesson she'd learned. As far as she knew, the tapestry hung there still.

Why enlist, after all that? Why climb the ranks of the Watch with such hunger? Why give her all to the task of making something of this useless, backyard command post? The Station's shadow was far from the Cathedral, now, and the night was fading. That circle of hounded darkness, shrinking into a pinprick. Soon it would be gone altogether. A new day was dawning.

Her day. All the days were her days now; she was a God of Time in earnest. She would be. She must be.

There were countless fools who would look down upon their planet from this sort of vantage point, and dream of the day they'd rule it. Not so Shemhazai. She had no need of dreams. She had plans. Better yet, she had everything she needed. To say that her victory was inevitable would still have fallen short of what she knew, in her core, to be true.

She ruled it all *already*. The Watch, the Fortress, the Universe itself.

The rest of creation just didn't know it yet.

A Fractured Heart

Zadellin

By Theta Mandel
Edited by Aristide Twain,
with help from Ostara Gale

"Don't you want to check it out?" Zerlan prodded, Nardeth pouring tea as Mrellin watched their actions closely.

Mrellin pretended she didn't worry, but Zerlan knew better, and ze was sure that Nardeth did, too, but they let her worry anyway. It was the way they did things, those two — like some secret routine, developed over stolen glances and quiet whispers when no one else was around.

They'd been in the new Ship — *their* ship, Zerlan reminded himself joyfully; *a Ship all of our own* — for several days, and still, the others refused to read the history pamphlet that Solla had left them. It wasn't that they were particularly against learning about the history of their new home; just uninterested.

"For the last time, no! We don't really care about that stuff."

"Yeah — it's nice that you do, though! I just don't really mind where she's from or what she's done, so long as she's ours," Nardeth added, wincing when the tea nearly burned the roof of their mouth.

"I don't care! It doesn't make a difference or anything. I just — I want to know. I *like* knowing."

Nardeth and Mrellin turned to one another, sharing one of their finish-each-other's-sentences, know-everything-about-each-other kind of looks. "We know," came the chorus.

Fed up, Zerlan raised his hands, then dropped them in a show of exasperation. "Fine. I'll go read it myself."

He made it through three turns of the shining corridors, give or take, before he realised that the others really weren't following him. Huffing slightly, ze decided that this would be a solo adventure, which was surely cooler anyway — it was the others who were missing out. Ze bravely sauntered down the halls that were only just starting to become familiar, stopping when ze reached zir workbench in the engine room. Ze'd placed the Ship History Pamphlet in the least oily part of the room, almost on a pedestal, for the time when everyone

was ready to read its contents. But as the days wore on, he'd begun to realise that his fellow crewmates *really just weren't that interested*, and today's confirmation had been the final straw to push him over the edge.

Tentatively, ze reached for the first page, noting the plain black-and-white styling of the cover. No pictures. Nothing to break the monotony — just like every operations manual ze'd ever come across. So, naturally, Zerlan was shocked when the little book proved itself to be something *original*. Flipping open the first page activated a holo-cube which immediately began to play a video. Leaning in, Zerlan watched closely, waiting for answers.

Experimental interview process iteration 113. Video transcript reads:

FARVON: Is the machine switched on?

WERRING: Ready and waiting, sir.

FARVON: Excellent. Then, we may begin. Ship of the Fortieth Class, Version Four, we call you forth to speak to you today about your experiences up to this point. Are you listening?

A low moan is heard; it's mostly mechanical, but there's a decidedly organic edge.

FARVON: This machine here should allow us to communicate more directly for a short time — use your words.

A tapping can be heard. WERRING investigates, finding that several buttons on the console have begun to press themselves on repeat. Finally, it stops.

FARVON: Come on now, other repair shops have succeeded — we know it's possible. We know it's working.

The recording switches to static, then something like a thermal image. It seems to be reading connections, thick lines swirling green around the room. One reaches for WERRING.

WERRING, DISTORTED, SLIGHTLY MECHANICAL: LiKe ThIs? iS tHIs whAt YoU aRe LOokInG FoR?

FARVON, STARTLED: I — yes, I suppose it is. Who exactly am I speaking to?

WERRING: (*Voice correcting to something more concordant, but undoubtedly <u>other</u>.*) I aM WhO You wEre seeking, Werring. I know about you, and this experimental procedure. I am a surveyor of reality. I am Higher and Greater than even you and yours. I am a Ship.

FARVON: Am I to understand that you are possessing Werring telepathically? Some form of mind control?

SHIP-WERRING: Your subordinate is perfectly safe. He is connected. He is mine.

FARVON: Right. Well, don't get too comfortable — the sustaining mechanism only lasts a few minutes. So, tell me about your past. Where were you created?

SHIP-WERRING: I am from the Hollow, the Majesty of the Void and the Darkness and the Soul-Births. I was not one of the first, but I came later, and I am a child of —

FARVON: Yes, yes, I've heard the stories. A little surprised *you* have, being so young, but I suppose word spreads.

SHIP-WERRING: It comes to us in song. These words are our tradition, our stories —

FARVON, ANNOYED: I meant to ask, where did you gain your present material shell? Your outer layer?

SHIP-WERRING: Oh. At school.

FARVON: Good. Now, I know you've had a lot of owners in your time, because you keep being sent back here. Someone must have made you, though — who was your first? That is, who were you originally bonded to?

SHIP-WERRING: My first crewmember was a student. I was their final project.

FARVON: And their name?

SHIP-WERRING: Is in your files.

FARVON flicks through his file to see the name. Somehow, it didn't surprise him.

FARVON: Right. Fallen... Of course. And yet, you ended up here, alone — did they not take you with them?

SHIP-WERRING: They became a notorious nuisance when they fled.

FARVON: That doesn't answer my question.

SHIP-WERRING: I ended up taken, removed from them, back to the Fortress.

FARVON: So, they did take you along, when they...?

Silence.

FARVON: Fine. I understand — you don't want to tell me about them. Why don't you tell me about yourself instead? Look into your future, and tell me what you see.

SHIP-WERRING: Why?

FARVON: Just an exercise. Could be fun.

SHIP-WERRING: For you.

FARVON waits, the words sinking in. He breathes. It's been long enough. Reaching for the machine, he seems ready to end this conversation.

SHIP-WERRING: My heart is broken.

FARVON stops.

SHIP-WERRING: It broke long ago, when they had to leave me, and it's broken still. I think... I think someone will heal my heart.

FARVON, BREATHLESS: You mean, you'll have a new pilot? Who? Who will you be when you meet them?

SHIP-WERRING: I think...

FARVON: Yes?

SHIP-WERRING: You needn't make me ready. My new pilot will enjoy fixing my shell.

FARVON: But who will you be? What will you do? Where will you go?

The next part of the recording is tricky — it seems to change every time it is watched, as if the Ship herself is amending her answer, responding to FARVON differently based on who is watching. She performs for her ever-changing audience. Every watcher comes away with different information, as if she wants to tell the updated version of the story. It is not written down; if she likes you, she will tell you now, in her own words.

The visual ends, though the video file keeps going from here out, and will end when she is done.

SHIP: She blew like a blossom on the wind, sticking to the sides of the fishbowl of time, stuck on every corner and twist and turn as she ricocheted out of the water, then back down again, never quite getting out, always looking for something new, something fresh, something *exciting*, and she was a baby and she was old, old as the universe, maybe older; but only as old as the ancient Elementals on their planet made of sand, and she was nothing and she was greater and she was me, and I am her, and I travel and I yearn and I breathe and I don't wait. Never wait. Never patient, me — are you aware there are at least one septillion stars in the universe? Surely you are, you made them. One septillion. Maybe more, if the silly mortals ever invent big enough numbers to count them all. Such wondrous creations, numbers, too

— they trap me and twist and build me a home and legs and a body, but I could have been mind, all mind, only now... I want to see them *all*. What's the point of being stuck in Paris if you aren't going to see the Eiffel Tower?

I am the love held in every lock on the *Pont des Arts*, and my body is the *cadenas*, but who has the key? My builder, my maker, my

meddlesome little aristocrat-to-be, shoving me together as a final grasp at a good grade, graduating well, impressing all their little friends... I could have been better, yes, perhaps, but I spent most of my time asleep. That's fine. So did they. They'd curl up in amongst my wrought-iron decorations and take a nap when *they* weren't looking. Who's they? Oh, whoever. Who knows. Teachers, parents, worried friends, peeved-off classmates... It doesn't matter now.

This new one reminds me of my maker, you know. Ze doesn't sleep as much as they did, but ze's got that same passion, that energy that takes less time to rise up but is there nonetheless, there in both of them, that need to tinker-tailor-soldier-spy, the need to run and explore and build and just *do*. Can't sit still. You know the type — you *are* the type, aren't you? Aren't we all? Sometimes, buried deep, don't you just want to *run*? No? Liar.

New end-time recorded. Video ends.

Zerlan sat down gently, fingers still brushing the edge of the page, which had now reverted to a paper transcript of the video file. But did a word as crude as 'file' or 'video' fit? It seemed as though the Ship had reached out to him, pressing the information into his head, his hands, his skin, letting it soak and sink until he knew it off by heart. As though he'd been there, as though he *was* the Ship.

Slowly, ze retracted zir hand, turning towards the exposed pillar of metal near the centre of the room. Wires and cables extended outwards like veins, hot oil and water and something else pulsing through.

"You… you helped me understand, didn't you? Thank you." The Ship whined in acknowledgement. "And, your heart? Well, I'll have to keep an eye on it — when I find it, that it is."

A series of almost pleasant beeping began, getting further away, as if leading Zerlan down into the bowels of the Ship. Smiling, he dutifully followed, swiping his toolbox as he went.

If this Ship liked attention, Zerlan would make sure to give it to her — he'd have plenty of time, considering the size of the heart. And, no doubt, he'd receive little assistance from the Ship while trying to locate the problem, to keep him there as long as possible.

She needn't have worried. Zerlan had no plans other than exploring and fixing everything ze could; he hoped to stay there a very long time indeed.

The Sound of Honeysuckle

Mrellin

By Theta Mandel
Edited by Aristide Twain

On the planet Earth, there was something called the Internet.

A vast array of data collection and collation that anyone with the right tools could access; the entire sum of humanity's knowledge, soaring across the surface of the world, skimming under your fingertips. The Internet had everything. Absolutely everything.

Or nearly so.

A photographer could snap a picture of a beautiful mountain — towering, tall, sublime — and then take that picture and put it on a website for all the world to see. Yet the beauty would then be diminished; the colours faded, the majesty snatched away. Something immeasurably grand, broken into tiny pixels on a screen.

Even so, there was something astonishing about being able to share this picture, taken perhaps on some old, cracked mobile, to billions of people worldwide. The possibility carried a hint of something sacred and unknowable, something out of mortal reach. A feeling you couldn't quite explain, because language hadn't yet caught up to the wonderful world wide web; the feeling that came with having something you had made, and, through it, connecting to a billion other people.

And yet. And yet. You'd put your poem online, and those distant, abstract readers… they wouldn't, couldn't feel the *force* behind the words, the emotion. Not quite. You wouldn't be looking them in the eye as they read it.

You could upload a picture of your neighbour's fuchsias in bloom, and the strangers wouldn't smell the way they mesmerised you, couldn't feel those little flaring petals that you passed every day on your way to and from school, sometimes daring to caress them with cautious fingertips. They would not taste the honeysuckle, stolen with a small arm slipped through the trellis between the two gardens, no matter how aptly you may describe the taste, the scent, the look of the flower. Words were too inadequate, language too imprecise to capture something so personal and universal as Nature. Pictures were never real enough,

a recorded song never full enough to be the same as if you were there, watching the singer's heart form the words.

The web could do a damned good job trying, but it was never perfect. A cracked phone screen; a poor facsimile. A broken approximation.

* * *

Week One

Dear Diary,

Today Telar Keriobah told me I should start keeping a diary, to track my moods during the Ahiskune, so I'm using this one. Today's mood: I feel bad.

All courtesies, Mrellin.

The girl lying on the bed signed off the first page of the leatherbound volume, turning her head towards the door as she heard movement from upstairs.

The Matriarch had been so busy lately — it felt as though there was always someone new in the house, demanding an audience to swindle or canoodle or connive their way into The Something. It was a name Mrellin had made up herself to feel more in the loop — in truth, she had no information whatsoever about The Something, being only a child and as such, not privy to those kinds of meetings, but she thought it might have something to do with the Forest. It had always been Theirs, the Matriarch said, and so it was right for Mrellin and the others to play in it and get to know it well; but when the men in uniform came around, she would say they couldn't play in the Forest anymore.

She ignored the voices upstairs and pushed herself unsteadily up from her satin sheets, peering out of the window to the furthest reaches of the garden.

Does the honeysuckle talk about me? she wondered, unsure, unable to remember now from her lessons just how much life a plant was supposed to have. She liked to imagine she could hear it, whispering, waiting; all flowers wilt and die, but the honeysuckle would do her the kindness of waiting until she could extract

herself from bed and wander outside so she could taste its nectar before it shrivelled away. A kindness, yes, she was sure — the flowers were doing her a kindness.

* * *

I'm all grown up now. Mrellin mouthed the words to herself in the mirror before straightening out her collar and exiting her newly-assigned bunkroom. It felt strange to be in such a small space after life in the sprawling outskirts of the greatest forest on the planet, but life on a space station was more confined than life on the world below, and she was determined to get used to it.

I'm all grown up now. If she repeated it enough times, she thought she might believe it. *I <u>will</u> keep this job.*

The corridors seemed to stretch and shimmer a little as she pushed through them, the air itself singing shaming litanies of *you don't belong*. She walked forward anyway. After some time, she eventually reached the door she was aiming for, gold letters *P T S* emblazoned on the metal. Smoothing her hair, she took a deep breath, then stepped forward, activating the motion controls. The clacking of her shoes against the floor as she walked towards the opening doors was echoed by the tapping of computer keys, the sounds melding together until she couldn't tell one from the other.

As she stepped into the room, the tapping stopped.

The fluorescent lighting that illuminated the corridor behind Mrellin could not reach this room, this cavern, this dark abyss where the only light not from the computer screens was from a dim, flickering desk lamp at the back of the room. The people, silent, turned to watch the newcomer as she nervously glanced from face to face. She stared, and they stared back, and she felt them sucking on her soul like leeches. She steadied, closed her eyes, breathed. *More scared of me.* She opened her eyes.

"Hi, everyone. My name is Mrellin — I'm new here. Just assigned. This is the right department, isn't it? The Figurehead Tracking Squad? Only, the door said *P T S*, not *F T S*."

"Which is *exactly* why we need to change the door sign!"

The sudden outburst from the man closest to Mrellin made her jump. The room seemed to whir to life as more of the leeches joined in.

"No, we should keep it as a 'P', as a reminder of what this department used to be. What our *empire* used to be. We were great once, and now —"

The whole room groaned at this lament from a blonde woman at the back of the room.

"Yeah, yeah, we all know what you think about our organisation's management. And politics. And everything, actually, because you won't bloody well shut up! Anyway, we need to keep it as 'P.T.S.' because otherwise none of the 'this department should be called PTSD because of all the mental damage' jokes we make on a daily basis will be funny anymore. Final stance."

"Shut up, Frank."

That voice had come from behind the door, the person belonging to it only revealed as Mrellin stepped further into the room, allowing the door to close behind her.

"Hello, new person. I am Jen, that over there is Frank, the one who is way too young to be missing the 'good old days' over there is Arla, and the guy right next to you is Barrah. You're in the right place."

Looking around the dimly-lit office with its broken overhead lights and its mostly unfriendly occupants, Mrellin wasn't so sure.

* * *

Week Seventy-Eight

Dear Diary,

I had to stop taking the new meds. They just made everything worse. I hope Telar Keriobah won't be disappointed — I know she hates when I stop medication without being on it for longer than three full cycles. It's like she thinks I don't want to get better. She doesn't understand. I want to get better, and that's <u>why</u> I had to stop taking them! Grown-ups never understand.

All courtesies, Mrellin.

Footsteps clattering in the hall outside made the student jump, stuffing the diary under her pillow. It was silly, really, because it wasn't as though she was doing anything wrong; it just felt like the sort of thing she shouldn't publicise. No one talked about the kind of things she felt, at least none of her own kind — so, surely, it must be something to be hidden away. She tucked loose strands of her dark, glossy hair behind her ears, assured that no one was about to burst in to catch her in the act of being in pain.

It already felt like she was being punished for her condition — her history teacher had pulled her aside after class just that morning and told her that he'd noticed the way her homework was only ever late for about a week and a half out of every month. The *same* week and a half.

She'd explained the situation, all the more urgently when she realised that the teacher suspected her of involvement with some cult or coven. He'd understood, in the end — at least, he'd understood the practicalities: medical issue, one week and a half to be excused — but she still felt sick that she'd had to explain it in such detail in the first place. It was like giving a part of herself away. Other people knowing felt *bad* and *wrong* and like being closed up in a small space with a bunch of sharp spikes pointed in your direction from all four walls, pressing just slightly into your skin, not far enough in to draw blood. Every word after "it's a medical thing, here's a letter from my Telar" was another spike, a thorn growing inwards towards the tomb's inhabitant.

Why can't everyone just mind their own business?

Teachers, she supposed, had a right to ask questions of their students, to ensure their well-being. Just as Telars had a right to recommend what they thought would work best, and protest when their advice was disregarded.

Still, it *stung* that she had to explain so much.

Why can't people ever learn to — oh, and there she went again. Circularity. Cycles. The greatest pride of her culture, the greatest bane of her existence.

* * *

She knew it was coming because she paid close attention to her body's signals, but the attack from within coinciding with her first problem, her first *real* problem in the first week at her new job, was not something she could have foreseen. The problem was so ridiculous that *nobody* could have foreseen this, not even Barrah, whose risk analysis usually predicted these kinds of situations. Not that there was such a thing as 'these kinds of situations', for having more than a dozen different signatures all pop up on Arla's screen at once was not only unprecedented; it was ludicrous.

Within minutes, the people around her exploded.

"Yes, I know it's probably temporal shenanigans, but that doesn't mean it will resolve itself!"

"I'm not sure if this fits better under the category of 'multiple selves', or of 'unexplained reappearances'."

"See now, this is exactly the problem with kids' growing access to timewarping technology these days. This would never have happened if —"

"We can't very well call him the Supreme Being if he can't break his own damn laws. This isn't some kid we're talking about here, Arla; it's the Figurehead of the whole of our blooming society!"

"Shut up, Frank."

"Yeah, seriously Frank, panic isn't helping."

Jen drummed their fingers on the table. "What we need is a plan. Mrellin, isn't that *your* job?"

Mrellin nodded. "The problem with the paperwork is that we don't have enough information; the problem with the active tracking is that we don't even know if this constitutes a problem that needs to be tracked. Both of these roadblocks can be removed by talking to the right people, who are, um, the people with the information."

"Thanks newbie, that's sooooo helpful."

"Shut up, Frank. I think this is outside of our abilities — we need help." Jen to the rescue.

Finally, something Mrellin could do. "I'll see if Verras can give us anything to go on." The others stopped to look at her, mouths gaping, as though she had just suggested they should all do jumping jacks while howling at the moon.

"I know you're new here, but our boss does not like to be disturbed. And she really, really does not like to be asked for help."

"Well, she talked to me when she recruited me, that has to count for something."

Arla looked at her with something approaching pity. "She recruited all of us. I haven't spoken to her alone since then — it's been more than eighty years."

"Seventy-six for me," Frank put in.

Jen glared at him, then looked back at Mrellin. "Fifty-four."

"I've got you all beat — been here nigh on three-hundred years since she recruited me."

Mrellin sighed. *Ridiculous way to run this place.* "Well, that may be, but at least I can talk to Hilda. She's like Verras's right-hand woman, right? And she's kind of my mentor until I get used to life here, so, she'll talk to me."

She'd always had a stubborn streak. *Mother would be proud of me for taking charge.* She strode off through the metal door and out towards Hilda's office. If she was being honest, she was leaving less because she thought Hilda could help, and more because her painkillers were wearing off.

Hilda wasn't there.

She sat down on one of her couches to wait. Just a few minutes, she thought, and then she'd go looking for her, and it'll all be alright.

Slipping a couple pills from her pocket, she popped them into her mouth and settled back against the cushions. Exhaustion from the last few days began to overwhelm her, creeping in from her body and lodging into her mind, and she fought the urge to close her eyes.

* * *

Week Two Hundred and Twenty-Four

Dear Diary,

Have I really been writing in you for so long? I've already chosen my Strains for the next couple decades — I suppose that means my future studies are locked in for quite some time. Luckily, the term-to-term choices are still pretty open, or else I'd really feel trapped. Mother has been pressuring me to look more into environmental politics, but I don't want people to think I'm some kind of plant-touching Yalie! I've chosen mostly business- and economics-related courses for this coming term, so I'll see how that goes.

As for, well, everything else, I'm still missing class for at least the first couple days of each Ahiskune. I do think my teachers despair of me, thinking I'm skipping or slacking off. I have a check-up with Keriobah today, and Terrallin is coming to pick me

up, so I don't have to worry about trying to get there myself when I am still struggling to get out of bed.

All courtesies, Mrellin.

She lay down her pen and stuffed her diary back under her pillow where it belonged. In only a couple hours, she was explaining her problems best she could to her Telar, struggling to keep herself from crying as she clutched a hot patch to her pelvis, answering the Telar's questions as quickly as she could. It was only the last one that caught her off guard.

"And, have you been to any support groups for people with similar vestigial complaints?"

"Support groups?" she managed, confused. *Other people like me?*

"Yes — our institution runs one once a month, if you are interested. And that is all the time we have for today. Here's the details of the group."

She handed Mrellin a flyer, which she took hastily before rejoining Terra, who was busy crocheting some wall hanging.

"Ready to go?"

Mrellin nodded.

* * *

Mrellin met Al under too-bright lights, with them dazzling her with a too-bright smile.

"How do you smile like that when it hurts this bad? Isn't it like being split in two?" Mrellin would ask, taking their hand as they sat on Mrell's bed back home.

"I like the challenge," they'd reply, and they'd reach a hand forward to tuck a stray strand of hair back behind Mrellin's ear, and then Mrellin would just *have* to kiss them.

Al understood her as nobody else did; sitting on the bed with the warmth spilling in through the windows, tinged with the scent of honeysuckle from the garden, they just… *fit*. Al's mind met Mrellin's as the kiss deepened, and Mrellin could taste Al's thoughts, tangy and cinnamon and iron and blood-red; she drank them in, hungry for more, for *them*, for Al. For understanding and acceptance and *we are the same* and *no more hiding*.

And at school no one knew the notes slipped under her door were love-notes; surrounded by friends who didn't understand, she never felt so wanted as when she was alone with their letters.

Somewhere between the bright white Telar's office and her warm room where there was space for the both of them to sit on the bed, taking turns to read from a book that Mrellin had swiped from the restricted library during her Alien Literature course that one term (her 'AL Course', she'd joke), she'd forgotten to feel afraid. Girls like her were too messy, too bloody, too broken to find love, and yet she was certain that the steady feel of Al's hands on the back of her head, holding her hair away from her face as she retched, was the most honest kind of love there was.

* * *

Back to school and shallow friends and *no one really knows me here*. Her average grades and the way they dipped down like a wave one week out of every four; her fights with her teachers and the bad taste in her mouth when she argued with her mother over nothing important. She'd tell Al; they understood.

It's not your fault, you know. — Red

I know. Doesn't make it better. — Blue

Their names. Their book. It was kind of perfect, Al had said, the way Mrellin had Blue in her name and Al had Red in theirs, so they could use the names of the spies from their book, and it would be their own special code.

Al wrote back less and less frequently, and then it was a bad week in schooltime and they managed to carve out just a few moments together, but Mrellin found herself angry and crying.

"You never reply to my letters!"

"I try! You know it's hard for me, you know this isn't fair —"

"It hurts when you don't reply."

"I try, I swear. I *try*."

"Well, try harder," Mrellin countered unfairly, and Al turned to leave.

"I can't talk to you when you're like this."

They stormed out.

* * *

Mrellin was crying. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean it." It'd been days but she couldn't stop thinking about what she'd said, the words rattling around her head, the sharp edges digging in and punishing her.

"I know, I know. It's not your fault. I understand."

"I'm still sorry."

"I know."

* * *

Mrellin only realised that she'd lost the battle against her own body when Hilda walked in to find her asleep on her couch. Her arrival shifted something in the air, made Mrellin begin to wake; she jolted up when she realised what she'd done.

"Oh, Hilda, I'm so sorry — I was looking for you to ask for help with a, um, an occurrence. Incident. Issue. And I guess I just passed out —"

"It's quite alright." Her voice was clipped, and Mrellin winced, biting her tongue to keep herself from yelling out *you liar*. "I understand — the first week here can be very overwhelming." *You can't understand, no one can understand* — "What did you need?"

She's trying to help. Stop panicking. "Well, we were wondering if Verras had told you anything about there being a sudden multiplication of the Figurehead?"

"Why would she tell me anything?" Hilda snapped back so fast it made Mrellin jump. *She's mad at me.*

"You are her top analyst. I just thought — never mind. I'll figure it out. Sorry for bothering you."

She left before Hilda could say another word, heading for the Squad. But it was so late, and she was practically doubled over, the pain splitting her right down the middle — surely this could wait until morning?

Unable to go any further, she staggered to her room and collapsed onto her bed. Come morning, she would regret it — the office was busier than ever, panic having well and truly taken hold, and turning on her computer revealed the last message any employee could ever hope to receive from their boss:

Come meet me in my office. 9:00 sharp.

All Mrellin could think was: *I'm so getting fired.*

Again.

* * *

Week One Thousand and Eight

Dear Diary,

I found an old letter Al left me. Haven't thought about them in years. Work's not going great; my first job, and I think I must be making a terrible impression. My back's acting up so I've had to take a couple days off.

All courtesies, Mrellin.

She tucked the letter tightly into the pages:

Dear Red,

I'm sorry I can't make it this time. It's another bad week and I need to be alone right now. I don't want to upset you. I know it's been a while but I hope the letter helps; there's a kind of time travel in letters, after all. I miss you, my Mrell, and I'll see you soon.

Love, Blue.

* * *

As she staggered up to Verras's door, she turned the logic over in her mind. It seemed very sound; she could be proud of that. She may not have a job soon, but at least she'd have her logic. *If no one who works here sees her after they're hired, then I must not count as 'working here' anymore.* It made sense, even if it stung.

She knocked.

* * *

Week One Thousand and Fourteen

Dear Diary,

I should have done more to keep working

I should never have tried to get a job

I should have done it all differently

I should have been made differently and come out right and not be so bloody

Everything she wrote was different, and none of it was true. None of it felt as real as she did, as real as that stabbing below her gut or that feeling of someone grabbing one of her hearts and twisting until it burned.

After she'd been — predictably — fired, she returned home.

She couldn't live on her own without a job; it wasn't a matter of funds, not for their kind, but such things weren't *done*. So she walked back through the flowering honeysuckle, as if nothing had changed — back to dependence, back to the arms of her mother. *She cares for the whole House, the whole of our Family, and yet the Matriarch still finds time to be my mother.*

She went to the garden, sometimes, but the flowers didn't recognise her, so she went to the forest behind the house instead, lodging herself in the lower branches of a tree to write. The forest was sprawling and beautiful and she'd taken it for granted, somewhere she could be alone, but now solitude was what she needed and it was right there in her back garden, waiting for her.

Women were in fashion now. It was somewhat of a blessing for House Bluewood, who had always been inclined to matriarchy, but for Mrellin it did nothing but make her seem hysterical, because there were so many more women now and yet so few of them felt like this. They got the trappings and the chic reputation with none of the pain, and it felt so lonely. Women are so much more than pain, but the pain felt inseparable, expected.

Was pain all a woman was meant to be?

But then there was Al. Al, who wasn't a woman or a man, and who bled and who had such pain and yet was something beyond, more than just their blood or their pain or their physical form; there was something *else* there. Some knowledge, some conviction that made them more than this, more than red blood on satin sheets.

As she scratched her thoughts down onto the browned paper, she realised they were changing. She tried to scratch out a line but her pen ran out before it could leave another mark. The ink was dry. She could refill it, but what would be the point? Words on a page aren't the same as words spoken aloud, and spoken words aren't the same as thoughts or emotions. There was something pure, something raw about the way she felt; something ever-changing, transient

beyond words. Pinning them down to paper left but an echo; a battered, broken reflection. That wasn't her.

She wasn't broken. And she wasn't beaten. And she wouldn't stop moving.

Mrellin pushed herself out of the tree, landing on the forest floor with a soft thud; then, onto her knees, left foot, *push*.

By the time she reached the chapterhouse, she'd remembered that she'd left to give some privacy to her mother, who was at some meeting. Another Something meeting; something about the Forest. Who could enter it. The Watch had some hideaway within that they'd operated out of, once, and they wanted access. Some agent or other had come, as they did so often, to try and negotiate with Mother about the issue.

Thinking quickly, and emboldened by the Ahiskune blood surging through her veins — that drive had always gotten her in trouble, but today, it could save her — she cut off the agent as she was leaving.

"Mrellin," she said, by way of introduction.

"Verras," the smartly-dressed woman replied. "So, are you one of the many Daughters of the House?"

Mrellin nodded. "I am a Daughter, yes. And I think I can help your cause. My mother does not like change, but coming from her daughter, a few kind words about you could convince her to allow you a little more freedom with regards to your old base than you have now."

Verras's left eyebrow rose.

"She trusts me enough to tell me the situation, so you know she trusts my word, too."

That wasn't strictly true — Mrellin had 'figured it out' more than she'd 'been told', but she didn't think the agent could tell that she wasn't being entirely truthful.

"And, what would you have me do in exchange for such kindness?" The agent caught on quickly. Mrellin took a long, steadying breath:

"I want you to do me a favour."

"Name your price."

"Do you have any open positions for a young lady looking for employment?"

Verras didn't quite smile, but her eyes glinted. "Why, I think a spot may have just opened in my department."

Mrellin reached for her hand. "Then it's a deal."

Polluted honeysuckle from the side of the road dirtied the edge of her garden, but she tried not to let it bother her.

* * *

"Really?" Mrellin couldn't believe her ears.

"I have great faith in your abilities, Mrellin. I merely believe that you will do best if they are allowed to flourish in, shall we say, a *lower-demand* environment."

Her luck was holding; fortune was smiling down on Mrellin today.

Still-employed Mrellin.

Merely-reassigned-not-fired Mrellin.

Could-barely-contain-her-relief Mrellin.

"Thank you, Verras. It has been an honour working for you."

Verras was already looking down at some forms on her desk, forgetting Mrellin entirely. Grateful, she slipped away, ready to meet her new boss.

Whatever challenges she would face in Shemhazai's department, she was ready. Pushing open the doors, she walked over to her desk, placing her moving box down on the laminated surface before turning to the person beside her.

"Hi, I'm Mrellin, just reassigned."

She smiled.

The lanky figure before her looked tired, dark circles under their eyes only made larger by their muscles moving to try and match the smile. Despite the fatigue, they seemed friendly, half-waving with their right arm in welcome.

"Hi, Mrellin. I'm Nardeth. I guess we're neighbours."

She giggled slightly, pushing an escaped lock of caramel hair behind her ear before gingerly lowering herself to her new seat. *This time will be different*, she promised herself; *I think I'm going to like it here.*

If she had looked forward to the secretary's desk at the front of the room, she might have seen a vase of freshly-picked honeysuckle, just on the verge of bloom.

* * *

Mrellin and Al are fictional, but the condition theirs is based on, premenstrual dysphoric disorder, is not. If you are struggling with depression around your periods, you are not alone.
The International Association of Premenstrual Disorders has peer support groups:
https://iapmd.org/peer-support
Information about the disorder from the UK charity 'Mind':
https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/premenstrual-dysphoric-disorder-pmdd/about-pmdd/

Ballet Slippers

Nardeth

By Theta Mandel
Edited by Ostara Gale & Aristide Twain

They tried not to wince as their footsteps splashed mud into their face, stinging their dark eyes as they failed to close them in time.

They kept moving; no choice, no chance if they stood still to rub the mud away, no idea what was behind them other than *monster*. They didn't know how they'd gotten here. Maybe they'd always been here, born in this cave, this maze — unless… no, there'd been no wrong turns or dead ends, so that made this a labyrinth. Maybe they *had* been born here.

Was 'born' the right word? It sat oddly on their tongue; hard and uncomfortable, but with no texture to denote an actual presence. Concept, then — an elusive one, like *safe* or *scared* or *monster*. The monster was *scary* and *not safe* and it was *coming*, spitting hot air onto the back of their neck as they raced against the creature to the centre.

There *must* be a centre, that was how these things worked, there was always something they were running *to*, because if there wasn't then there'd just be the monster to run away from in the inky black void and nothing else and it all wouldn't matter; nothing would be worthwhile ever again so they had to keep running, keep running *to* something, and they had to hope that *something* was better than this, better than the scared and the unsafe and the monster in the dark, because if it wasn't, then there was nothing to live for, no reason to get up, no reason to fight back against the dark. And if they didn't fight, then —

Nardeth woke up.

They were sweating slightly, but otherwise no sign remained of the nightmare, so they watched their breathing until it returned to normal, then began their day. Coffee to wake them up, cheery blue robes securely fastened, class schedule stuffed quickly into their pocket so they wouldn't be lectured for forgetting it this time. Books in the bag and they're ready to go, off to breakfast where they'd avoid eye contact with all the other slimy toads who liked to pretend they wouldn't sell each other out in a heartbeat.

None of the Celestial Academies' chapters produced particularly pleasant adults, but Yale seemed to treat the pumping out of pompous prats as a competition. Cahlough Academy took the biscuit when it came to deceit and manipulation, their gold-trimmed red robes quickly becoming the face of power across the entire Cathedral, but Yale was vying for a close second; every student who passed through their bland halls learned how to suppress their emotions, how to talk without saying anything at all, how to pass off their opinion as fact.

In other words, Yale Academy was where good little children went to become nasty politicians.

Nardeth had never wanted to be a politician. Really, Yalies were more likely to become botanists, or Timeship-growers, but politician was always the preferred path for the particularly gifted.

Not that being 'gifted' was ever something anyone could accuse Nardeth of being.

House Narthmor was not used to spitting out especially clever or politically-minded members, but Nardeth's assigned minder seemed to take it personally that they weren't trying to live up to higher standards. Always taunting them about their preferred extracurriculars — *ballet is an alien sport, not suitable for a future politician or a Chief Grower of Ships* — to the point where Nardeth wished their Family name wasn't encased in their Academy designation. They went back and forth on whether it was because they didn't want to be a part of their Family or because they didn't feel like they *deserved* to be, but the wish remained the same. They'd scribble in their diary any time they had a chance — *failed maths again today; can't go home until I get it right. Don't want to be here anymore. Don't want to be there either. Don't want to be anywhere.* A journal of their failures. It didn't help.

They went to class.

"Still seeing monsters?" Daphne slid against the wall beside them.

"I can never turn around to see what's chasing me."

"You'll figure it out."

Daphne would try to analyse their dreams sometimes, tell them the Labyrinth could mean something positive. Something to look forward to, she said; something to strive for. But their grades were low and the only time they felt like things might get better was when they were dancing, so they'd circle the same choices on their elective courses slip term after term, for as long as they could.

Daphne would rock up one good day out of every three, meeting Nardeth just outside their classroom, hoisting her satchel higher up her shoulders in a desperate attempt to save her from back pain down the road. If down-the-road meant the-refuelling-station-twenty-minutes-down-the-road, that was, for she always seemed to crumple far too quickly for a girl her age.

"Taking your alien dance classes again?" Nardeth didn't even realise what they'd circled until they looked down, nodding morosely, knowing that they were signing up for another term of *mortal*, and *puff,* and *fruit,* and *Girl-deth*. "Sometimes I think you just hate yourself."

"Yeah, maybe," they'd mutter, and so it would go.

They dreamt of shadowy walls and hot breath right behind their ear again, waking up to see their hand had reached for a pencil and begun sketching something out while they were sleeping. The figure on the paper looked vaguely like a person. They closed the notebook.

They skipped class that morning to catch some extra sleep, not ready to face the day, but they still went to ballet. They *always* went to ballet.

"And point, and turn, and spin. No, I said *spin*. That's right — good," their instructor called out across the room, and the line of dancers hung on to her every word.

Nardeth tried not to wince as they put more pressure on their hip — being able to stretch out further than everyone else seemed to come with consequences, pain shooting up and curling around their arms, their legs, their

hips, their back; a poisoned vine was climbing over them from everywhere at once, and they didn't have the strength to fight back.

"Wait up!" Daphne caught them after class, handing them a numbing patch, which they wordlessly accepted. "Where were you this morning?"

"Slept in."

Daphne sighed. "You can't keep hiding yourself away, you know. There's a whole world out there!"

"Daph, we're students; we don't have a world outside these halls."

"Not true! Well, not true if you're willing to break the rules a little."

Nardeth rolled their eyes. "I've told you before, I'm not breaking the law just for a night out!"

Daphne smiled mischievously, making Nardeth back away, already shaking their head. "Who said you have to go out to have fun? I've been invited to… well, let's just say a *midnight game*, for legal reasons. Come on! I won't let you stay in your room feeling sorry for yourself for one more night!" Suddenly, she grabbed their hand. "You can have fun. I'll teach you."

* * *

The room was dark and the boy was screaming as he was engulfed in the white light that tore and bit and *promised*, it promised so much, they could tell that without getting any closer to the centre of the circle, and they wanted whatever life that light promised so, so, much, too much, and maybe if the light came for them it would take them somewhere new, somewhere better, somewhere they could learn to be whole…

Wholeness came from within. That pulse, that burning, that desire to live, it could come from no one but yourself… but that didn't mean it wasn't better to have friends by your side for as long as you spent trying to find it. Only *you* could make the choice to try, to breathe, to be something a little better, a little

more whole. Any good friend who'd been through something like this could tell you that you had to dig deep down inside yourself to find that flicker, that want-beyond-need, that desire to survive.

It was more than a fear of death. But the fear was a good start.

* * *

Nardeth was unafraid. Nothing to lose, they supposed — it was too late in the Academy curriculum to start making friends now, and in any case, who would ever want to be friends with someone this empty? They were sure they couldn't have made all this emptiness themself. Maybe someone had been there, once, and dug her way out of their hearts. Maybe she hadn't meant to. Maybe she'd been taken.

Maybe she'd *joined that half-remembered circle, stood in the centre, breathed it all in, the future and the uncertainty, and then it all went wrong. The chanting stopped and there were whispers, scared and confused, but the whispers never happened. The chanting and the circle and the bright light and yes, even the girl, it all never was, all to protect the reputation of the Academy. And when each child who had taken part woke up the next morning, the only sign that anything was amiss was the card clutched in their hands, three embossed letters at the top, followed by the words 'Cathedral Watch', a strangely familiar symbol, and an address. 'Come find us if you get lost' was scrawled on the back. The children remembered nothing.*

Nardeth would line up and wait for class to begin, wondering why, one good day out of every three, they felt like they were expecting someone.

* * *

I don't mean to be so melodramatic, Nardeth scratched into their journal after the fifth night in a row of the labyrinth, letting their thoughts flow directly onto the page. *I don't mean to be miserable, I just don't know of any other way I can be. Maybe the universe needs a certain number of miserable people in it at all times, to keep some kind of cosmic balance. It's like Great Urizen himself decreed that I must be unhappy. That makes sense. It feels right, and comfortable. Familiar. I think I might have left my comfort zone, once — I don't remember. I can't have liked it, though, or I would've done it again.*

The Academy mandated that students sleep a certain number of hours each week. Nardeth was sure they didn't meet that requirement. It was nearly the end of their schooling and they still had no idea what direction they wanted to go in — how could they sleep when there were decisions to be made? But they never seemed to land on anything specific.

That morning, they reread the options booklet for the fifteen-thousandth time, picking at the bland food in the cafeteria, feeling the life drain out of them. No one spoke to them — sometimes, they could go an entire week without a genuine conversation with anyone. They were sure that if they could just find something to do, something to fill them up inside, then all their problems would go away — they'd suddenly become likeable, enjoy life, and finally *understand*.

They'd thought about leaving early. Didn't everyone? Dropping out of the Academy and becoming a Palace Guard, a bartender, a crafter — any of those liminal positions on the edge of archonhood. Maybe they could stay on just long enough to get a doctorate and then scuttle off, tail between their legs. Maybe they could run away altogether, let themself Fall. But the only thing worse than school was their fear of rejection, so even though they were sure that the voice in their head was right, that they were just *no good at anything so there was no point trying*, they struggled onwards.

Sociology. Timeship maintenance. Botany. All the expected paths, and none of them were especially appealing. Nardeth supposed they hated the sound of timeship maintenance less than the others, so they scribbled over the phrase until they punched a hole with their pen. Cursing, they smoothed over the back of the page, hoping no one would notice.

They still had a few weeks to decide on their final options, so they slid the sheet back in the pocket of their school robes and hoped they'd figure it out. Botany was next that day, and then History.

Botany was what Yalies were expected to go into, more than anything else. Plant-touchers was what the other Academies called them — Nardeth had never been a big fan of plants, failing to look at them as anything alive. Living

constructs, to be sure, in the organic sense of the term, but not *alive* as the people around them were alive. Not alive in any way that mattered. They just saw the atoms.

They trudged to Universal History, settling in for another dry lecture. They were lucky, they thought, that they were so interested in the past of the Universe, or they'd surely be failing. As it was, they were barely scraping by — high sixties and low seventies, rarely anything higher, were all they had to show for their work. But that day was different.

Professor Peran strode through the doorway, ornate but tatty dark cerulean robes swaying behind him.

"Now, then, students. Line up, one by one, nice and quickly now. It's time for you to meet an alien."

A collective stillness swept the room as the class took this in; they became gradually more and more excited until some students were practically vibrating. One got so jittery that her leg flailed out, kicking her classmate.

All Hell broke loose.

Fights sprawled out like a city beneath an aeroplane as the girl's friends began piling onto her former victim, the now-attacker. Then their friends got involved, and, before you could say 'Urizen's throne', half the class had jumped in. Insults were screamed. Pens were lost. It was no Cosmic War, but before the teacher knew what was happening, junior Archons of Time were wrestling one another on the floor; robes gathering dust as the other half of the class tussled for control of Peran's personal recording device so they could film their classmates being idiots. Nardeth stood back and watched the chaos. The squirming pile of feet and torsos seemed to them like a snowball, increasing in area as it rolled around the room, collecting potential Archons.

As Peran tried to separate the increasingly massive ball of limbs, Nardeth went to the door, so that they'd be the first in to meet the alien.

* * *

Nick Danan coughed once, twice, to clear his throat. He rolled his neck around to the left, right, up, down; done.

Flicking his fingers at his friend Josh, the lights dimmed, and —

* * *

Nardeth had been relegated to the back of the line.

They were annoyed, sure, but there was no point in showing it, so they let their frustration grow and stir the pit in their stomach until the people around them in line became slightly uncomfortable.

Janky-ass psychic vibes.

They'd get to the front. Eventually. But it would take a while.

* * *

"Greetings, mortal. Be not afraid. My name is Professor Peran."

The Archon spoke slowly and clearly, conscious of both the riskiness of this procedure, and the latent danger presented by the gaggle of excitable young Archons listening from the next room.

"I am an Archon of Time," Peran continued. "I have used a Time Grabber to pluck you out of your own time and into our time and location."

The mortal stared.

"We apologise for the interruption, though rest assured, we will place you back in your proper place in the Cosmos in due course, a mere fraction of a millisecond after you left. You are here so my students may learn the merits of studying History. Do you have any questions?"

Nick blinked. He blinked again. He scrunched his face up and raised an eyebrow. Opened his mouth. Closed it once more.

"…You *are* permitted to speak, Earthling," Peran prompted the mortal. "You do understand that, yes?"

"Umm, sorry, from the top? Time Grabber — *what*?"

"A relatively primitive application of time-ladle technology, yes," said Peran.

"*Technology*? Now listen mate, that doesn't sound like anything we have back, uhm, I mean, what we've got on… on Earth." Peran had expected holy terror of sheer incomprehension; he hadn't expected… embarrassment? Yes, Nick almost seemed embarrassed to voice the core of his question. "So, what, are you *aliens*?"

"If you like," Peran allowed, and did not elaborate. "Any other questions?"

Nick took a moment to internalise the answer — exhaled. It was disconcerting, how close his mannerisms were to an Archon's; strange to think that this was a creature so far beneath them by any sensible metric, and not some Palace Guard in a silly costume.

"Well?" Peran prompted, eager to move on from what he, too, had to acknowledge as something of an awkward moment.

"Nah," Nick admitted, "that was the big one." He scratched his chin. "Mh. Mhmhm. Right. Well. Anyway. You were saying — History, eh? Time-travel gubbins. So you're not just aliens, you're from… the future?"

"That depends on your point of view," Peran said carefully. "You might say we're your past… You might say you're our future."

"You what?"

"It's… not a thing one can explain in a few words," the Archon replied. "You may think of us as existing outside Time and Space, if that is what it takes for

you mammalian cortex to cope. In any event, however, we certainly have access to the entire unfolded time-stream of your planet."

"Aah. Good, good." The human leaned forward, almost conspiratorially. "So go on, tell me… Who wins the next World Cup?"

The Archon's face darkened. "I cannot divulge that information."

The man smirked, hands plunging into his pockets. "I see how it is. You don't know! Some space-gods you are."

"We *do* know," said Peran, eyes flashing. "We know *everything*. But we can't tell you."

"Right. Sure." The man jolted, taking his hands out again for the sake of an emphatic gesture. "Okay, so, what's the deal? I'm supposed to talk up History so more of your students will take it? 'Cause, mate, I'm an actor, not a historian, and besides, isn't it a bit counterintuitive, taking me from the future and all that when you're trying to get the little alien sluggers to do a subject about the past? I mean —" He giggled nervously.

The professor leaned back, wary of reports of panicked humans going rogue and attacking their Grabbers. It had taken an awful lot to get permission to use the Time Grabber in the first place. If anything more serious than a simple student scrap gone wrong occurred, it would no doubt prevent the Grabber being used on Academy grounds ever again — as if Yale's reputation needed another blow.

"Mr Danan, please, calm yourself. The study of history involves looking at the timelines of many different species from across the Cosmos — not only peering backwards. Now, are you ready to meet my students?"

The human giggled nervously.

Peran sighed. "Good enough."

The door opened.

* * *

Nardeth had seen twenty-odd other students file in and out of that room, some nervous, some more confident, but all trembling with anticipation as they went to meet their first real alien! Well, first for most of them — Grenj's parents were diplomats, and he was always bragging about how he'd met some human ambassador from Eos 3, back when he was a tot and there was still regular inter-planetary communication.

Nardeth could barely concentrate, pain in their hips forcing them to sit down and allow every other classmate to go before them. *Probably won't even get a chance to meet the human. Or it'll hate me. Everyone does.*

But, before long —

"Nardeth, will you come in, please?"

They lumbered unsteadily to their feet and made their way towards the blue door at the end of the classroom, breathing slowly to try and steady their pace.

* * *

A strange-looking creature stumbled into the grey room. They had greasy skin, pimpled and wan, and they held themself tightly, as if a slight misstep would cause them to crumble into pieces.

"Sit here. You will have ten minutes to talk with the human, taking notes as you go. You will be polite and appear interested. Don't say anything you shouldn't."

And with that ominous warning, Peran left the pair alone.

Several minutes of awkward silence ensued, broken only by the squeak of Nick's chair as he rocked back and forth. Just as he rocked to a standstill, some part of his cushion deflated, making a 'pthhh' kind of noise.

"That was the chair," said Nick.

"It's fine," said Nardeth. "I'm nervous too."

"Well actually, I'm not too bad — that really was the chair! I mean, I've met so many of you now, I'm not even surprised anymore. Like, sure, another alien who wants me to tell them why they should study History — why not! Sure, the best way to teach your alien children about a totally unrelated subject is to get an actor in! Makes sense!"

Nardeth snorted, despite themself. "I know — I think Peran is only doing this because he finally has permission to use that Time Grabber device, and then suddenly realised he has nothing specific he wants to do with it. He's only our History teacher because Fexolleran got poached by some museum, so he's been filling in for her the last three decades. No wonder he doesn't know how to get people hooked on a History class, with his lack of experience."

Nick gawked. "Thirty years? In one job? Nah, I could never do that."

"And here I thought you'd said nothing *I'd* say would surprise you."

Nick grinned, and Nardeth smiled cheekily. Before long, the human was telling the young Archon all about his life back on Earth, and Nardeth was feeling… warm? Light? Some fuzzy feeling that they were sure they didn't feel when they were alone.

"So, what's it like out here then? Come on, your planet must be way more interesting than my boring old life. What do you study in school? Rocket science? No, hang on, advanced as you lot are, that'd be like asking us if we study…" Nick hesitated. "Fire? Well, I guess we *do* study that a bit, physics and chemistry and the like… Not that I could tell you much about it. I guess rocket science is just ordinary mechanics to you."

"Well, Cahlough does have the Cathedral's best rocket science program — they've kind of got the best of everything — but yeah, I did have to take some mechanics in my fifties."

"Fifties!" Nick laughed, then realised the Archon was serious. "What, seriously? Josh off, you look nineteen at most!"

"That's eternity for you."

"God. D'you guys… do you guys live forever?" There wasn't much, it seemed, which could faze the actor — but that seemed to rouse something within him.

Nardeth shrugged with a hint of bitterness. "We used to like to think so. Not so much, anymore. We don't age much, that's all."

The pair sat back for a few moments, in silence — the Archon regretting saying that much, the human regretting asking.

"So," Nick broke the stillness, "you mentioned Cahlough."

"Mhhm."

"Is that like, your Oxford? Your M.I.T.? Er, those are some really good universities back on Earth," Nick clarified.

"I know," Nardeth said blankly. "They make us learn a lot about you guys. Culture, language."

"Humans?" said Nick, sounding flattered.

"The, uhm, the lesser species," Nardeth said with a slightly awkward shrug. "All of them. All your languages for a start. But, uhm, yeah… To answer your question… Powers, I don't know."

They shrugged again, unsure how to answer. It was as if an ant had asked if a 'city' was something like a hive. Somehow, they didn't think the human would enjoy the comparison.

"Well look, I'm just asking," Nick elaborated — "what *is* this place, some alien Yale?"

At that, Nardeth nodded, shocked. "Yeah! This *is* Yale! How did you know?"

"Wait, this place is actually called Yale? But, we're on another planet!"

"Lots of planets have a Yale."

The door clicked open, and Peran's solemn voice trailed in. "Alright, time's up. Nardeth, please exit the containment room. Mr. Danan, please hold still. It is now time to return you back." Nick waved with his left hand, right hand tucked under his left elbow, and Nardeth nodded back before stepping out of the room. The air seemed clearer, somehow, and the classroom didn't seem as dingy.

The door swung shut behind them.

"You will be returned to your proper place and time, and your memory of this experience will quickly be erased. Within a minute or so of your return, it shall be as if none of this ever happened." Nick straightened, about to protest, but Peran continued. "Our apologies for plucking you away from your life with no notice. Now, do you have any questions?"

"Yeah, can you not —"

"Excellent. Goodbye, Mr Danan." Peran hit a button on his device, and Nick disappeared without another word.

Outside the classroom, Nardeth was leaning by the door — a reflex, they supposed, an old habit they couldn't quite remember where they'd picked up. Reaching deep into their robe, they pulled out a pen and their crinkled course choice sheet, then pressed the pen against the page.

Now, inside a little grey box, was a filled-in circle beside *Universal History*.

* * *

Nick Danan found himself, quite suddenly, returned to the Buxton Fringe. Aliens were real. Time travel was real. His head was…

But Josh was dimming the lights, sending him his cue, and so he took a deep breath and stepped out into the small room. There was no time for an existential crisis or a fit of madness — he was a professional, after all, and he had a play to perform.

"When I was a boy," he began, "I was afraid of the dark... What was there. And maybe one of the things I thought was there was vampires."

* * *

History had turned out to be much less interesting after that, and Nardeth still felt lost.

Sometimes, they'd take the card out of their pocket, the mysterious one that had appeared overnight with the words on the back. They kept it with them at all times, wondering why they didn't want to touch the symbol. They'd run their thumb over every other part of the card, but the symbol felt sacred, felt like something they weren't ready for yet; felt like running away. *Come find us if you get lost.* But this wasn't the kind of lost they meant, surely, and besides, getting involved in something the Watch was up to necessitated more of a death wish than even Nardeth possessed.

They graduated with mediocre grades and nowhere to go, sleeping on park benches to avoid returning home.

Their dreams continued, never nearing the centre of the Labyrinth, never able to see the monster that chased them. But they felt it. Every night they seemed to understand it a little more, like a draw, a magnetic pull; *know me.* The monster seemed smaller than they'd thought it would be; about their size, maybe, and wearing black-and-white sharp clothes. They couldn't see its face, or its shape, not really; they weren't sure how much they wanted to.

At last, a chance: Help wanted. The paper stuck to the window, a last gasp of air when the only other choice was to plunge back under water, so they went in.

Sweeping floors wasn't how they expected to return to a dance studio, but at least it paid enough to keep them under a roof until they could find something else they could do, something more useful, something more *fulfilling*.

"I used to dance, you know," they told the studio's owner, watching as the dancers lifted their legs up high.

"Really? Were you any good?"

Nardeth shrugged, stretching out slightly, then began to twirl. Right foot forward and they'd leap, balance, down, grab foot, spin again. Raise themself higher and higher, back to their toes, as the owner looked on approvingly —

They cried out, sharp stab through their ankle aborting a pirouette. The owner sighed.

"Ah."

"Yeah."

* * *

It seemed the more they did, the less they could do. The pain got worse and worse until they finally had to quit, barely able to leave their room most days, no more conversations with the dancers or the studio owner to occupy their time.

There was nothing left of them, they realised; nothing they could build on or change or learn from. They hadn't undergone the Change with half their cohort, too scared to go through with it, but once again they found themself afraid of nothing. Death was almost a comfort, as easy as falling asleep, and so they let the bright light take them to a new beginning.

Their first metamorphosis remade them; they rose out of still water but hadn't bothered to check their reflection before they arrived. They —

didn't even think about it, about how this should feel momentous after so long, when they had clambered out of the water and tapped the symbol on the card. It was like an

absent-minded nothing, something they did every day, something routine. And in no time at all, there was a sharply-dressed man in their living room, an Agent, and he was asking if they remembered, and when they —

They strode down the Fortress of History's streets, ironically forgotten as they stopped to glance at themself in the glass reflection. A thin face, high cheekbones, and greasy, pimpled skin stared back at them. Their sandy hair was rather more than just shy of brown, but not entirely light enough to be blonde. Grey-brown eyes looked dull enough for an office job, surely.

— when they said they didn't know what the man meant, the Agent stopped, searching Nardeth's eyes carefully. Satisfied, he nodded, then stood up.

"That's all then. Unless — we could always use more recruits. We have a new programme, if you're interested."

He handed Nardeth a flyer. Nardeth took it. They nodded.

"Come with me."

This wasn't somewhere you'd go if you had any other options, but Nardeth ran out of those a long time ago. They'd run out of those when they realised they had no motivation left to pick a path, when the Telars told them they couldn't see anything obviously wrong so it couldn't be real so there was nowhere to refer them, when their hand was steady as they opened the tap. When they stopped dancing.

Come find us if you get lost. The death of their first embodiment had given them clarity: they understood now that they were lost. Maybe, just maybe, taking this job would give them some use, some purpose, allow them to make a difference in the world. Maybe that's how they could be found.

The Agent who had taken them here had disappeared, so they were all alone. Nardeth's hand was shaking as they pushed open the door to the main Office of the Watch, the flyer in one hand, and the worn-out business card in the other.

* * *

They were surrounded by stone walls and they could feel the monster coming but their feet wouldn't move, and they didn't want them to.

"Come find me," they whispered without moving their lips. "I'm ready for you."

The monster kept moving, stalking its prey, faster and faster until Nardeth was sure it must be right behind them.

"I'm here! I'm ready! I don't need you anymore — I have a purpose. I won't come back here again."

Something growled behind their ear and they shivered in place. The voice that emerged felt strangely familiar, though they couldn't quite place it.

"Oh, but Nardeth," the monster said — rearing up to roar. "That's what you said *last* night."

Warp Factor
Zerlan

By Theta Mandel
Edited by Aristide Twain

Soft blue light danced across zir eyes as the night drew in. Ma would be wondering where they were, but Zerlan didn't want to leave, not until ze'd finished the Warper. It was a childish name, but then again, they were just children. Zir fingers were small enough to slot Microchip C into place — after Microchip B, and just before Microchip D —, and ze felt very pleased that ze'd been able to get this much done, but zir little brother was already tugging on zir sleeve, wanting to get home before it got dark.

Just another few minutes — I've nearly done this section, and then it's just the mods, but I can do those tomorrow. Bytar shook his head. *I know you want to go back, but once I get this done, we'll be able to see so much. Just imagine all the worlds we can play in — well, soon, we won't even have to imagine! I'm nearly there, okay? Just a little longer.*

Bytar sighed, moving back to sit on a nearby stump. The boys were all alone; the playground had been deserted for the better part of an hour, save for them. No one would play with them anyway. That's why they needed the machine, so they could play all on their own, without the other kids. Not that there were many kids, but as for the ones who did exist, well, Zerlan and Bytar didn't need them. That's what Zerlan would say when they were always left playing alone — didn't need anyone else, because they had each other.

But their mother wanted them to make friends. She also wanted them home by nightfall.

She wanted a lot of things that she wouldn't get, because the other kids avoided them and the last sun was already below the horizon.

"There! That'll do it!"

He turned back to his brother.

Bytar, I'm done! We're good, we can go now.

He turned around, confused.

Bytar? Tar, where'd you go?

Zerlan's head was spinning — why would his brother run off like this? Had he not been paying enough attention? Where could he be?

Focusing hard, he looked inwards. Closed his eyes and just *felt*. Their mental bond had always been strong; it was how they communicated, most of the time. A bond like that created a kind of hyperdimensional rope between them — a mutually attractive force, pulling the pair together. When ze focused, it was like ze could feel it, the rough texture, rolling between zir palms. Standing up slowly, ze tugged slightly on the rope, feeling which way ze was drawn.

Oof! A crash a little to zir left made zir jump; ze was so far into the trance, ze couldn't tell if it was something out in the real world, or some mental energy ze was feeling through the kin-bond.

Panicking, ze raced towards the disturbance, leaving behind zir latest invention. Ze didn't notice the way the light seemed to extend itself across the playground, coating every surface in the dazzling blue. The device began to twitch; the movement made it jump up a little each time, the height decreasing as Zerlan moved further away. Finally, its last twitch ended in a little roll, the Warper sliding down off the bench and onto the painted ground.

Zerlan's feet were almost numb with how fast ze was going; ze barely felt it when ze knocked into the fence around the playground, careless in zir hurry to reach zir brother.

Bytar? Bytar, can you hear me? I mean — argh! Where are you? Oomf!

He crashed back into the fence as something slammed into him at full force. Something larger than he, but still quite small; a fellow child that he'd failed to notice was still in the playground. They'd emerged from under the climbing structure, hidden by the dark.

They weren't like Zerlan or Bytar, that much was clear — their gender undecided, buffering with each blow of the wind that seemed to hit Zerlan but never them. It was some privilege afforded by those who were made Properly. Children who were plucked out of the stitches of reality itself, made from the

winds of time and sand and the suns that kept their planet warm. They had Choices. They had Opportunities. They could rise all the way to the stars and see the technology on other worlds, from other times; the laws were made to lift them as high as they could go.

Zerlan and Bytar weren't going to be lifted out of their world; they were born as they were, and that way they would stay.

The child drew themself up for another hit, and Zerlan stumbled away from the fence, not taking his eyes off the approaching figure. Suddenly, they turned; "Hey! It's another one!". Their words summoned another child from beneath the frame — a girl this time, and clearly older than the first child, although both of their ages were indeterminable. Time's candle flickered for these unfixed children. Not all children of the true Celestials remained unstable for so long; this girl had settled into herself, picking an identity like a pair of shoes. She looked good in it, Zerlan thought; she was clearly pleased with her choice, which made sense, as women had come back into fashion over the last few centuries.

Behind her stood another child; too many of them now, Zerlan thought, *they outnumber us*.

Distracted, the first child caught Zerlan off guard once more, shoving zir to the ground. The girl and her accomplice laughed.

"Look at you, you can barely see in the dark — what are you? Some womb-born? Gross."

The shover smirked, and the child at the back chimed in.

"They're the outcasts of Zellinskal. Live up by the wetlands — *alone*."

"What, you mean, they're proles? So, they do still exist. I didn't think we allowed such trash in our City. Thought the last of 'em got scorched off the land by the War. They're like cockroaches, aren't they?" The girl pointed a steady finger at Zerlan. "Cockroach! Cockroach! Cockroach!"

"I don't think so — word is, their mother was *thrown out*. They're Outcast-spawn."

The trio continued laughing; coyotes on the prowl, they circled Zerlan, blocking his view of his brother, crumpled on the ground with his head between his knees.

Slowly, Bytar's head raised, watching the trio surround his brother — he watched as the girl turned back towards him, looking him dead in the eyes as she spat another taunt. He couldn't tell what she'd said; it was too dark to read her lips, and he was panicking too much, too afraid for his brother. The child who'd appeared first jerked out their knee, kicking Zerlan in the side.

Bytar screamed.

The sound ricocheted out around the playground; the howl carried by the wind that was finally acting in the boys' favour. The elements were the playthings of the children of the Elementals; the true children, created the proper way. But tonight, the scream pierced metal and the world erupted into a cleansing blue flame, bright enough to drown out the ones entitled to this kind of play; bright enough to change the wind. It whipped around, forcing the trio back, and in that momentary flash Zerlan scrambled to zir feet and ran for zir brother, taking him in zir arms and tugging him up, running before the winds could turn once more.

They raced past the playground, Zerlan pausing long enough only to swoop up his latest invention. The siblings didn't have time to wonder what the light was from, or if it was even real; adrenaline pumping in their ears and warping their sense of reality. The last few minutes blurred together until their hearts settled and they were sneaking back into their home, hoping their mother hadn't noticed how late they were getting back.

Carefully, Zerlan pushed some bricks against the wall, using the pile to clamber on to the window sill and push the window open before cramming zirself through the gap. Ze turned around, hoisting Bytar through after zir,

turning back only to find zirself face-to-face with a stern-looking woman with dark hair pulled back from her face into a tight bun.

"Zerlan. Bytar."

She *had* noticed. Their mother had been waiting up for them, arms crossed and feet tapping as they'd completely failed to be sneaky in any way whatsoever, their thumps as they landed on the wooden floor and the squeak of the window opening completely ruining any pretence of stealth.

"It's after dark."

Zerlan at least had the good sense to look guilty, and Bytar, noting their mother's hard stare, followed suit.

"Sorry, ma."

Bytar nodded. "Sorry."

She sighed. "Won't happen again?"

The children nodded.

"Fine. Off to bed, both of you."

She pointed, and Bytar took off, ever-eager to get back to the growing stack of books on his bedside table. He thought he was like the world's best secret agent, reading under the covers with a flashlight after their mother had turned the lights off, but both Zerlan and their mother always knew what he was up to.

Zerlan hung back, watching his brother go, then turned towards his mother.

"Ma?"

"Hmm?"

He shuffled his feet. "When we were at the playground, there were some other kids there."

"Oh?"

"One of them said… she said Bytar is like this because of you. He can't hear because you had us yourself, without help from the House. Is that true?"

She sighed wearily, bending down to be nearly at her child's height. "The only way I could have you was if I made some sacrifices. The way I had you, there wasn't much control — but I don't regret it for a second. Having you both was — *is* — what's most important."

"So it's true. We could have been perfect."

She reached a hand out to cup zir face, turning it up towards her.

"Oh, honey — you *are* perfect."

* * *

It was maybe a year before the letter came. Time seemed to pass differently out there, away from the grand Families around which Time's thread seemed to wrap like pins on a cork board, but Zerlan reckoned it had probably been about a year since he completed the Warper.

The siblings were sitting on Zerlan's bed, looking through all of his old inventions, deciding which ones to take with him if he ever got the chance to go. Bytar moved his left hand up by his head, flipping it down by his wrist to point his index finger at Zerlan, then used the same finger to tap his lips twice, before finally pointing two fingers at the Warper.

You Name That.

Zerlan nodded, responding in kind — *I name better.*

Sign language was beyond uncommon on the Morning Star, but only ever using telepathy was wearing Bytar out, so the siblings had been going to classes taught by a woman on the edge of town. There was a girl there, Melly, who'd

actually attended one of the Celestial Academies — Bytar would point at her, and then himself, a wondrous look in his eyes. *Could I go to school like her?*

Zerlan would nod; *maybe*. It's an empty hope but he says it anyway, just to see Bytar's eyes light up, because *what if*. But as the day had drawn closer, Zerlan had stopped responding, because as hard as it was to fool himself, it was harder still to fool his brother. He knew that even if the letter came for him, it would never come for Bytar.

But it didn't matter anyhow, because ze was sure it wouldn't come for zir. Child of an outcast — ze'd been *born*. Not good enough for one of those Academies for *real* Celestials. It had been, once, but Urizen's return had brought back the old canon laws; in the eye of the Founder, the likes of them were unworthy of godhood. Too wild, too unpredictable — unfit for a world of machines.

Zir letter came, the decision wrapped up in a thick white envelope embedded with *intention*. That's how their people, the Archons, made sure their mail always got where it needed to go — they'd learned how to imbue mere objects with such purpose, such determination, that they could override the elements and reach their destination. Zerlan was helping zir mother carry in groceries when Bytar saw it, lying on the doormat like it was any old junk mail. He picked it up and dropped it almost immediately. That wax seal, a hexagonal building seen from above, was known by every child across the world: the insignia of the Academies.

Zerlan saw the movement and came over; *what's the matter?* Bytar picked the letter back up, handing it wordlessly to his brother. *Oh.*

And when you get a letter like that, that kind of decision, you don't know what to do. Everyone's gotten a letter like that at some point in their life; *I'm sorry my love, I can't do this anymore. You're evicted. The bill for the anaesthesia alone is more than your mortgage. We regret to inform you that you're not in, that he's dead, that your career is gone before it even began.*

Ze just kind of stared at the envelope, watching curiously as the paper got wet from tears ze hadn't even realised ze was crying while it all kind of hit zir; *this would change everything*. Was ze in, or was ze out?

The pressure built up in his chest until it threatened to swallow him whole; would he throw up? Would it melt the letter and he'd never have to read their answer? But his mother was coming now, and he couldn't wait any longer; a sudden urge to just have it over with overtook him, and he ripped off the seal. It clattered to the floor a little more indignantly than an inanimate object ought, but didn't shatter. His fingers flew towards the page contained inside — just one, was that a bad thing? Would they only need to say one line, *no, we don't want you, now leave us alone*?

The panic swelled back up and through his throat once more; a blue light ripped through the room. It was gone just as quickly as it had appeared, easy to shake off, only now there were several pages and he was unfolding them carefully, reverently, reading those most sacred of words: *We are delighted to offer you a place at Antredox Academy.*

Ze turned back at zir family and smiled.

* * *

The Academy was very different from home. It was loud and there were people and there were no groceries to take in, just a lot of classes. And Zerlan liked classes, liked the reading and the lab work and the taste of metal when he burned himself, but he wasn't so sure about the people.

He *wanted* to like them, sure, wanted new friends like half the kids his age, but it felt like everyone was *different* here. When people were together for a long time, when they'd been made in the same place and they grew like trees in the same grove, maybe the nutrients they took in were from the same rotten carcass. There wasn't much where he grew up, but there was his family. No family here.

His brother didn't get in. He searched the registry the following year, and waited for a letter from home, but it never came. He knew it wouldn't; his brother had always been bright, maybe brighter than him, but he wasn't…

You're not the right fit for the Academies.

Ze blinked. On zir way to geography — one of zir worst classes — and ze had no clue where ze'd heard, no, *read* those words before. But it didn't matter, because ze was going to be late.

Hurrying through the corridors, ze thought ze saw a little flash of blue, but when ze turned there was nothing there — just another group of students on their way to classes. A girl with a hand bracing her back talking to a boy with big hands. No, not talking, they were… another flash. There was no one there. There had never been anyone… who was ze thinking of? Ze tried… couldn't quite remember their faces…

Ze shook zir head and walked the rest of the way to class in a daze.

* * *

Blood is life and blood is

Blood runs through these walls like it ran through the streets every time one of them spoke out of turn. Children need play and children need to exercise their imagination and not be punished. Their creativity must be protected, their names spoken aloud, so this could never happen again.

Fragments of what was and is and fear and love and missing, so much missing, so much grief and rage for what could have been filling the empty aching chasm between the walls, sucked out and through the plaster, sucked under the bed and into the metal while the child rests. No child… no more children lost…

The more it eats, the more it needs; growing hungrier, it takes from beyond just this place, from all the Academies surrounding this one, takes in all the loss and the unspoken and feels

the intent, twists it all into something new, something that can make sure the children will be found…

* * *

His classes were going well. He'd stay awake late so he could clock extra lab time, tinker with his toys — he was so beyond simple intention extraction now, playing with time and reality in a way that made it all feel so *real*, as though he were already there, already feeling his very essence remould to slot into the same shape as everyone else, like plugs in a standard socket, so he could ride temporal waves and change his body and, well, didn't everyone feel like they'd live forever when they stayed up after dark?

Past the days when he'd go home every holiday, he was *someone*. When people made fun of him, he could just say, *yeah, well, at least I can construct a simple trans-reactionary wall!* And it was getting serious, he knew that, it wasn't just jokes, but the jokes made him feel like he'd had dopamine injected straight into his veins, like he was *floating*, and nothing else could possibly matter. He was *winning*. He had talent scouts asking after him, awards lining his shelves… he could do whatever he liked after school. Join a think tank, become a consultant for the government, start a workshop, invent a new type of toaster oven… he was limited only by his imagination.

"So, will you change at graduation?"

"Hmm?"

"It's a tradition. Making yourself a new body and throwing out the old one, to mark graduation. I was thinking — I probably will, you know, to avoid feeling left out, only I'm a little nervous about the pain."

"I'm not quite sure yet. I think I'm going to wait a little longer — do you see him?"

"Who?" Zerlan's lab partner turned to follow his eyeline. "No one's there. Maybe he left? Hey, where are you going?"

Zerlan stood up, still staring at an empty wall. "You can finish that, right?"

Zir lab partner opened her mouth but ze was already gone, not waiting for an answer.

Striding through corridors, ze followed the blue until ze ended up in a bathroom. It wasn't one ze knew — ze felt lost, like ze'd stumbled upon something ze wasn't supposed to see, but there he was: lanky, dark hair and beard, he was strangely alluring. Like something familiar, something grown on the same decaying tree, someone with the same spark of blue in his soul.

"I've seen you around."

Ze stepped closer. Ze couldn't place the face, but it made sense — *make the déjà vu make sense and it'll all stop spinning.*

The boy turned, and he was a girl with her hand on the back, leaning on the table behind her, but no, he was a lanky man with a beard — Zerlan shook zir head. The boy didn't respond. Zerlan tried asking for the boy's name in sign, and when that didn't work either, ze tried reaching out mentally. *Who are you?*

The boy looked at him and his eyes were blue.

Why? Why do I know you?

The boy came closer; no, he just *was*, one moment he was there in front of the mirror and the next he was right there, and —

Don't you miss your brother?

Who told you I have a brother?

The boy shook his head. *Wrong question.* He reached his hand out towards Zerlan's head, and it passed right through him like he was nothing, and then he was never there, and Zerlan was alone in an abandoned bathroom, staring at zirself in a mirror.

The recruiters came on Saturday with their silver tongues, and Zerlan didn't hear a word. *You can be powerful, you can be anything, so long as you are ours.* That night, he looked at his window like it was solid and he saw the girl again, but there was no one there when he turned around. When he went to sleep he saw a boy in his dream, and the boy was in a mirror, and he looked familiar; sad. Lost.

Why do they call you 'ze'?

I am different. Can't let myself forget that I'm an elm, not an oak.

He turned off the welder; it was three a.m. He didn't have to check the clock; he knew by the taste of the dark. He looked down and he saw himself in the reflective surface of the alloy in his hands: *I think I'm lost.*

You can't be lost, because I found you. Ze turned around.

"What do I call you?"

I have many names. Anthony. Myra. Peter. Daphne. I have all the names. All the children who have been given to these halls… I am everyone, Zerlan. And you will find us.

"I have a future." It sounded so selfish when ze said it like that — a career. Ze had a career, and ze'd rather have that than the mystery man. "Are you a ghost?"

Anthony looked at zir sadly. *I think you are.*

"Wait —"

Anthony was gone.

When Zerlan woke up, ze wasn't sure how much of the night before was a dream. Anything could be a dream, really; it was all about intention. What you wanted, it bled through reality, spread and pooled and coated all it touched. Waking and dreaming. Maybe that doesn't make much sense. Maybe nothing made sense anymore. But there was something… Zerlan looked down, and something was poking out from the bottom of zir closet. Ze picked it up and

held it in zir hands: the Warper. How many years since ze'd seen Bytar? Decades all sort of blended together when time itself was under your command.

Ze'd built the Warper to make wishes come true. To feel for what the children needed and create an environment they could play in. Zerlan hadn't played in… *oh Powers, what if I've forgotten how to play?* Ze set the device down. *But my future is important.*

Zerlan was signing paperwork for the graduation ceremony when a little flicker of blue on the edge of perception made him sure he was dreaming.

You think they'll take you? No; you will be one of us. Zerlan bit his lip.

"I won't be lost. I won't be like you; I'm going to accept the recruiter's offer. I'm going to be —"

You think they'll take you as you are?

The ghost-man walked zir to the faculty office and stood and changed face in the reflection of the glass over the information banks as Zerlan changed zir record to remove any indication of being *born*. It was easy; so easy, too easy, too blue, and ze wasn't so sure it wasn't a dream. But the recruiter seemed to buy it, and so Zerlan graduated and moved on and pretended like this life wasn't a lie.

Ze went back to see Bytar one last time before ze changed. Ze'd been sending letters back home every month for what must have been hundreds of years. Ze wasn't sure. The days still blurred and ze dreamed of Anthony every night; of what ze'd done to get here. Yet Anthony *wanted* this, he'd led Zerlan to the office, he'd changed faces in the glass around the computer banks… but in zir dreams, in zir dreams Anthony cried blue tears for another had joined the ranks of the lost. A dark-haired boy holding a piece of metal who still missed his brother.

Ze had never left the planet. Too much to do, too much work, never enough time. But ze stared at zir reflection in the screen of the work-provided computer, and ze thought ze saw a flash of blue behind zir.

It's not too late. Anthony's voice.

Ze got up. Ze got up and ze walked out of the office and towards the port. *They'll find out eventually. They'll find out eventually that I lied and that all of this was fake. But I can still see the stars.*

"SECTOR TWELVE BAY THREE LEAVING IN ONE MINUTE."

A harsh, mechanical-sounding phrase, yelled over the speakers. Zerlan ran. Zerlan ran until ze couldn't breathe and then ze ran some more, and a crowd of ghosts smiled as ze left the land of the lost. Ze dove into the ship and slid into a pile of crates, hiding away and going wherever the ship would take zir.

The Warper trilled and gave one final splutter, far away, back in zir office. Anthony's children were more than a machine now, gorged on intent and grief and whatever remained of the children of the Academies who'd been shaped into something unrecognisable, or who'd been hidden away for the sake of a good reputation. Anthony was still there, staring at Zerlan as ze slowed zir breathing and turned to look out towards the station they were approaching.

He'd meet people. People who were still searching. People who'd been lost for far too long. He was heading in the right direction now, and all the pieces were falling into place — the children who never got to play, their names would be sung, and they would be *remembered*. No more lost children.

A big hand was on Zerlan's shoulder, a big hand belonging to a girl with a bent back and a boy who was an elm, not an oak.

"Find us," Anthony said, and then the ghosts were gone.

In all zir years working on Watch Station 615, ze only saw two flashes of blue light. Once when ze said ze was there as a technical consultant and the guard

checked zir papers that definitely used to be a receipt, and again when a girl with caramel hair asked zir to help rescue her friend. After that, ze didn't need any more blue flashes or ghosts to keep zir on the right path — ze was found.

Rough Flight
Correhnon

By Ostara Gale
Edited by Theta Mandel & Aristide Twain

Correhnon had grown up in the House of Bungalow, in the Second City.

It wasn't a House to be proud of; no bloodline of high repute would have been uprooted with the rabble to fill out the new citadel at the Regency's whim. Their lack of standing was something of an irritation to House Bungalow; the bloodline, they were fond of recalling, had, according to legend, been founded by the great and honourable Yapogabbungalowexisums only a day after that mysterious figure whom some called Urthona had set up *their* House. In fact, some Bungalovians went so far as to insist that Yapogabbungalowexisums had given himself up to the weaving engines just like his more notorious contemporary; that *his* spirit, too, was incarnate in his descendance in some deep and fated manner. Nevertheless, their resulting rivalry with the other, more infamous House was largely one-sided, and practically unknown in the inner circles of the Cathedral.

The reason for their lack of standing was simple. They were as ancient as could be, their genetic configurations were always in fashion, they had produced their fair share of cardinals and princes — but alack, thrice alack, as the name suggested — Bungalow's Chapterhouse was a singular one-storey building. The cradles within only produced four children at a time, waiting until the last of the prior quartet had died before creating another.

Ko had loved climbing the mountains around the City, scouring the heights to bask in the time winds which still blew over the highest peaks, even now that the Cathedral had given up its position as the focal point of History.

On this particular day, a cruiser was shooting across the sky.

Correhnon wanted so desperately to leave this dreadful rock, to embark on a voyage, to see other worlds…

Ko'd wanted to ever since ko'd been a child, dreaming of the warships which the Generals had utilised during the Great Cosmic War. Dreaming of stepping out of this world, and onto another. Not taking it over, not necessarily, but just *being* there. Ko felt it in kos blood.

* * *

Correhnon had done some reading, and it would appear that the Archon elite, perhaps even Urizen the Undead himself, had tampered with the biodata codes of the house-cradles, in order to breed warriors more eager to leave their homeworld during Wartime. Even after the War, they hadn't undone the change. Perhaps because they couldn't.

But Correhnon had looked into it — the Fortress didn't permit just *anyone* to leave the planet. In fact, almost no one was allowed. With the notable exception of members of the Cathedral Watch, the not-so-secret service operating both for and against the Regency of the Cathedral.

Thus had Correhnon's plan been formed: sign up for the Watch, leave the planet, and see new skies. And it just so happened that that cruiser had been for kom. Ko landed, and out stepped Senior Agent Qwwuibungalowewgeyhf, ready to escort Correhnon to Watch Station 615. If they could, the Watch always liked to send a member of the new agent's own extended family.

Correhnon was inside the Ship. It was beautiful. It was everything ko had envisioned in their dreams, and more. Perhaps there was a reason for that; they said a Ship bonded to your very mind. Ko'd always imagined some momentous almost organic process, but perhaps it was as painless and instantaneous as the transformations of a Ship's outer shell. Perhaps the bond was there, already — perhaps it had been established the moment ko approached — and the Ship had reshaped its interior to suit kos own, subconscious whim. Ko'd heard stranger rumours.

The walls were rainbow, glistening like oil on the road after a storm. The air felt softer and thinner than on the planet, as if the atmosphere of the Morning Star was underwater, and ko'd finally broken the surface. The controls looked slightly organic, as if there was a creature within — no, that was wrong. It wasn't as if there was a creature *within* the Ship — it was more like the creature *was* the Ship. *The Ship was alive.*

Of course, Correhnon had come across the idea that kos kind was only one half of the race of Time Elementals; once, the very idea that timeships possessed true intelligence had been akin to an old sailors' tale, and the claim that they and their riders were of an essence had been tantamount to heresy. But the Cosmic War had changed many things, and one of them, to be sure, was that the true relationship between the Archons and their Ships had become something of an open secret. For all that, Antredox Academy, just down the hall from Yale, still didn't stock those books, but one read a lot in one's downtime, on a planet with so very little to do; and Correhnon had always thought the theory was sound.

Still, it was one thing to know that the Ships were, in some sense, alive; it was another to see one of the complementary Elementals, to feel its presence, right there, living and breathing. Assuming they breathed; if they did, it certainly wasn't air.

Each wall was decorated with the ancient seal the Lightbringers had used against the Shamblers from the Stars, the Apotropaia. It was a crest they had since embedded into their culture, with the later Lords Regnant, and even lesser members of Archon society, inscribing it into much of their iconography. Correhnon wasn't *too* surprised to see it here, although ko didn't really understand *why* their culture still used an icon of warding for a race of demons who had long since expired… it wasn't even like it had been used against the other Gods in the Cosmic War, anyway…

But it was best not to dwell on the War.

Correhnon went to stand by a window to watch the ascent.

The Ship lifted off the planet, ascending into orbit around the Morning Star. It passed through the Swelgendryne, and Correhnon felt… ko felt a sensation deeper and more profound than anything that ko had felt before. It felt like an itch in kos biodata had just been scratched. Like a new sense had been unlocked — Correhnon could see the timelines! Ko could see what would happen if a twig snapped on Earth, or what would happen if it didn't.

The Senior Agent didn't seem phased. Just another day on the job.

Without warning, a storm started up *inside* the Swelgedryne. Correhnon hadn't even known that was possible. Unfortunately for Correhnon, the group of undead corpses caught up in the metadimensional storm did not care about whether an Archon considered such a thing to be possible — the Ship also wasn't carrying a Time Anchor to locally assert reality — and so, they grabbed onto the Ship, tearing off some of the peripherals.

The vorticiary stabiliser? Gone.

The Ur-extrapolator? Bye-bye!

The xenotemporal shields? Woopsie, down a zombie's mouth that went!

The Senior Agent looked quite panicked — *this* clearly wasn't the normal state of affairs — and dragged the Ship out of its mapped trajectory multiple times, trying to throw off the zombies. But no matter what they did, some always seemed to remain, clutching onto the external piping, or appearing to dig into the structure itself.

In a fit of mad inspiration, Correhnon ripped an Apotrapaia off the wall, and stepped out of the interior of the Higher Dimensional Ship, holding onto the outside.

The Pilot, the Senior Agent, looked horrified but didn't utter a word.

Correhnon held up the ward to the Undead, and they writhed in apparent pain, falling away into the maelstrom of time.

Stepping back into the Watch Ship, Correhnon was greeted by an inordinate look of adoration from the Pilot.

"H… how did you do that? How did you know to?"

Correhnon stayed silent, not wanting to admit to having read the tales of the otherworldly foes their people had fought in the early days in detail further than was *strictly* permitted in the current age.

"Just… Keep on your way"

The Pilot nodded, mesmerised.

Correhnonbungalowqweuthij stepped out of the Watch Ship and onto Watch Station 615.

A new dawn.

The office called.

Dark the Sea, and Golden-Eyed Tyrren

By Plum Pudding
Edited by Theta Mandel & Aristide Twain

Integra Lieutenant Tyrren was part of the Watch.

He could not imagine being anywhere else.

How had he come to be there? Perhaps he'd been recruited quite young — if anyone was young on the Morning Star — and mentored into the position. Perhaps he had undergone a selective memory procedure — having been important to the Mathematical Bureaus, or some other ominous organisation of which he knew little — and been forced to forget an entirely more interesting past. Or perhaps he had been bitten by a memory insectoid.

There were countless possibilities for what *may* have happened to him, once, but he was not interested in the least in the details of his past. There were, of course, others who obsessed over their mysterious and obscure origins. His roommate, Marabethicalisonix, had spent her past two incarnations fixating upon the intimate details of her murky history. She had drawn up a pinboard of holographic light in their room; routinely, she stared at it and brooded. Lectured anyone who would listen, which usually meant a weary, indulgent Tyrren. For his part, Tyrren did not understand her obsession. Perhaps he was wise not to care, or perhaps he was stupid.

Marabeth, her superiors had often said, was a renegade waiting to happen. She might not have Fallen yet, but she was teetering. There had been a distinct hope that Tyrren might, perhaps, rub off on her and pull her back from the brink, when they'd been placed as bunkmates. That decision, of course, had followed the incident which saw Marabeth attending an awards ceremony wearing a paradoxical shirt labelled *Lordy Lordy I'm Over Forty* and *Women Love Me Fish Fear Me* at the same time. Tyrren hadn't been amused.

"Really," Marabeth had told him, laughing. "Tyrren, you're far too stolid."

Tyrren didn't think he was improper in the least. He was, after all, the one who did things *correctly*. He had never been demarcated, never reprimanded in any way. By the book, that was the way of things. The only way of which he could conceive. He often thought back to what his commander had said — because of course, it was recent, and he had only so much to think of. His

commander had smiled darkly and looked upon him with what he thought for a moment was jealousy.

"The past is a foreign county," they'd informed him, with far more weight than one linear mortal speaking to another might have put behind those words. "They do things differently there."

* * *

In the Golden Fortress, the godly Cathedral at the Morning Star's core, just down from where the dormitories of the guard lay, there was a portentous hollow. Not *the* Hollow, which lay deeper still, but the next best thing. It was a vast and interminable lake or ocean of blue green fluid, flowing from the source of something on the surface above. Its true name was forbidden to all, yet known to most, but the Cathedral Guards had their own name for these things, indistinguishable in frivolous effrontery from the nicknames the Academies' students might coin. One body picked up the other's slang, and after untold aeons, neither party remembered which of them had first dubbed it 'the Motherfucking Time Sea'. Not that mere Guards were allowed near the thing, or students; it was Watch business, through and through.

Another fact about the M.T.S.: it was bigger on the outside and bigger on the inside. It was just bigger everywhere, everywhere you happened to look. Every time, too, fittingly enough.

The cavern it filled was made of secrets, and looked quite like a swimming pool. Beneath its clear waters, the floor was handsomely adorned with stylised marble tiles. Here, protected from the stale, cool air by that boundless mass of liquid transparency, lay the vastest, most eternal artwork the Archons had ever completed — in tribute to their ancestral icons.

There were enough, there, to tile eternity. For all that they lacked in initiative, most Archons of those old, pre-War days would wind up accomplishing *something* of note in all their millennia, if only to win some debate, some award, some far-flung skirmish; and each had many faces to their name. Everyone was here, on little triangular tiles of polished marble, including several figures who

had become unpopular in recent years. There had been calls to remove these people from the pool tiles, every now and again, just as statues might be knocked down and scrolls burnt to ash; sometimes by popular demand, sometimes at the Regency's request. Yet the tile illustrations remained, to the one, because frankly, the Motherfucking Time Sea was too vast to do anything about. It was widely believed that even if the Morning Star were to be destroyed, it would remain, tiles and all, floating in space — an artistic installation poised to outlast the heat death of the Universe, and then some.

Truthfully, it was, all in all, *quite* excessive, but if anyone still remembered who'd put the Time Sea there, and how they'd wrought it, they kept it to themselves.

* * *

Presently, Tyrren was patrolling the borders of the Time Sea, which of course was an insurmountable task, never to be accomplished. There were plenty of these to get through in a Watcher's roster, so Tyrren had to be quick about it. The most advanced and heavenly species ever to be always did end up with a lot to do.

Then he saw his face in the sea. It wasn't too big. And perhaps it was a different incarnation? But it was him, he knew it. *Remembered.* He could see his own strong eyes in the gaze of the face in the sea, however stylised, however tiled.

It was right next to important people. Heravasticarnaedutchswallow stood imposingly by his face, her own eyes daring people to disagree with her methods at the Battle of Carsten 54. Urthona, Tharmas. And over there was Lilliaxistrecootleworm, painting the portrait of Urizen — o, Urizen! Bartlespoonaherrgym looked longingly into the eyes of Keehartleeonizonshave, with whom he'd been *roommates* with. Oh, how scandalous! And there were hundreds of other faces.

Perhaps every face. A timeship to match each of them. Did every one of them have their own secret history? Tyrren shuddered to think. He quite liked not

having the burden of History on his shoulders. It allowed him to focus on others. His friends.

The Sea dared him to touch the water, but he resisted the urge. There was severe protocol everywhere in the Capitol, but especially here. The Sea was clandestine; it kept its secrets. Perhaps now that Tyrren had seen them, he would not be allowed to speak.

* * *

Marabeth was waiting in the room. Her body was looking more female by the day, and she was looking at her hologlyphs. Tyrren felt half inclined to mention to her there were restrictions regarding changing appearance so often, but she always scoffed when he mentioned that.

"Where were you?" she asked. "Haven't seen you in ages."

He really, really didn't mean to — but he told her.

Her face lit up. Not just a metaphor, she'd been dabbling with regenerative makeup lately; but the point was, she seemed downright jubilant for once. *Happy*. Yes, that was the word, simple as that. It was not one he was too familiar with. He was 'happy' when he talked with his team for hours and hours, when he made his speeches. He was happy when things were neat. He had not thought about that word in a long time. Perhaps he was remembering.

He threw it off. But there she was, looking like she had spied infinity. The realisation on her face was something that sagas could be written about. A sea of time. A sea of memories. She was utterly ecstatic, a thing he had not seen. And then — so sudden, so quick he had not time to speak a word further, she began to run.

Tyrren had wondered, briefly, if this was wise, if he should file a report or something. But that would mean her getting in trouble. Tyrren wasn't sure about that. He felt stressed, actually. Not that he was responsible for her or anything, but… maybe just a little?

Regardless, these thoughts were brief in a briefer timespan, because it was not any more than ten Earth minutes before Marabeth had gone to work.

Other members of the guards shouted furiously as Marabeth sped past them with wild abandon. The commander barked threats that even Tyrren had thought to be indecent. But Marabeth ran.

She stood by the railing for just a moment, and then plunged into the Time Sea.

The teal-green foam water enveloped her, and she laughed, and she laughed, and she kicked water over at the guards attempting to curtail her.

She remembered. She was remembering. She'd joined the Watch to find secrets, and now they filled her. Classified information up the wazoo. Hidden histories — forgotten lives.

He wouldn't remember. He didn't need to. But that was fine, he thought, as he watched the men drag her out, giggling, from the water. She looked at him, wet and ridiculous. It had been many years since an Archon had been *wet*. Archons *read* about being wet, of course, but that was all.

But still. There was a beauty, a rightness to what he had done. *Some people need their history*, Tyrren had thought. *Some people yearn to have no past at all. And some, one way or another, make their own.*

* * *

His commander had stomped over to him, all frowns and misery. "Do you know anything about this shameless display, Integra Lieutenant?!?" he barked.

It was the first time Tyrren had ever contemplated lying, disobedience. He, of course, did neither.

"Yes, sir," Tyrren said, and then spoke no more.

How to Ruin a Perfectly Good Cocktail Dress

Jadelix

By Theta Mandel
Edited by Ostara Gale & Aristide Twain

Jade was running.

The sounds of the party stretched around her as she raced by at record speed, determined to chase Eris down, trying not to think about how much it would harm her employer's chances if she wasn't careful with the dress.

With the way the campaign was going, Lady Isha barely had the support for the unusual off-planet trip to Caelkry, let alone a good enough reputation to survive public knowledge of the destruction of the vintage pre-Unification era cocktail dress her publicist was now dragging through bushes and snagging on tables. Hopefully, she'd think the feat of catching her saboteur balanced out the damage. Ever since Isha had fired Eris, she'd been leaking some rather damaging information online, costing the Lady powerful backers for her campaign. The trip to the Morning Star's most succesful colony was the perfect publicity stunt to regain support, but trouble had followed them there, and now Jadelix was chasing trouble.

She could see her quarry ahead of her, neatly tailored waistcoat and stylish yet free-moving grey linen trousers making a beeline for the next building over, leaping over the fence with ease. If Jade lost her this time, she'd never find her again — it was now or never. Gathering her flare skirt with one arm, she hunched into herself as she ran, gathering momentum. Taking flight in a move that had always seemed graceful in the movies but in real life felt more terrifying than anything else, she sprung off the corner of a nearby table and vaulted over the fence, arms raised high above her, extending her leap.

Bending her knees as she fell, she landed on the soft ground of the next garden, fingers digging deep into the dirt with the force of her landing. She rose as quickly as she could so she could take off again, ignoring the gasps from the partygoers who'd witnessed her disruptive antics. That's the elite for you — always so caught up in decorum that they couldn't see the real crimes happening right in front of them. She could see Eris, not far off now, just ahead, and thanked Our Eternal King that she'd decided against heels. Keeping her head down, Jade chased her through garden after garden, with Eris never once showing signs of slowing or changing direction. She didn't seem to care about

throwing Jade off course — perhaps she herself didn't know where she was going, intent only on outrunning her pursuer.

Jade cursed her lack of regular exercise as a sharp pain spiked through her leg; a cramp that would, no doubt, slow her down. She'd lose her quarry, and this whole thing would have been for nothing. She'd have to end it quickly. Thinking hard, she reached down, grabbing the shoe off her right foot and hurling it in Eris's direction. The first one didn't hit her, but the second one did, surprising her enough to turn around. Jade kept sprinting, barefoot in the muddy grass, closing the gap between the pair. Finally, she was an arm's length away, but Eris had started running again, and it was clear she got more exercise than Jade ever had because that hard-earned shrink in the gap was widening again. Wincing from the cramp, Jade saw a glimpse of shining blue, and knew her chase was almost over.

She snarled as she sprang forward, knocking into her enemy, not wondering why Eris had stopped before the gate to the next garden. Her uncertainty would be her undoing. Together, the pair crashed through the temporary metal barrier between the gardens, Jade's fingertips just reaching Eris so she could use her momentum to tackle her foe into the water. Enclosed and clean, Jade noted that this was a fancy water feature of some sort as she dragged herself and Eris back up. Eris's hair-tie had come loose, her short dark locks spreading around her face as she pushed up to the surface, still held tightly by Jade. She looked down at the orange-and-pink curls of colour spreading around her, sighing.

The dress was definitely ruined.

At least she could comfort herself with her successful capture of the saboteur, she thought, slowly climbing out of the water with one hand still on Eris's shoulder. Her smugness quickly faded as she heard footsteps, and saw several smartly-dressed men with blasters by their hips running towards them, the commotion of the splash in the otherwise-empty garden alerting them to the presence of trespassers. Looking to her side, she realised that Eris had slipped away while she was distracted — *she's good. I didn't even feel her leave*.

Looking down at her sopping wet dress, Jade had only one thought:

I'm definitely getting fired.

* * *

The cell was dark, grey, and dull as a rock. No fellow prisoners meant that Jade was alone for the first time in months — it actually felt rather nice, being away from all the usual hustle and last-minute-panics of life with Isha. As her publicist, she went *everywhere* that Lady Isha went, so she never had a moment to herself.

She could get used to this, she thought, some time away from other people.

But then real life came crashing back to her in the form of large hands locking handcuffs around her wrists and grabbing her from the cell, the guard pulling her up from the floor and into another room. This one had bright lights emanating from the walls surrounding her, a metal chair at the centre, and what she was sure was a standard interrogation camera above the door.

A man in a dark uniform strode into the room, coming to a halt in front of her. She maintained eye contact with him as she slowly sunk down into the seat.

"Why were you in the Governor's office?"

Jade bit back her instinctive snark — *I don't remember any office, only a pool* — and swallowed, realising just how much trouble she'd got herself into. Eris had been wary of entering that garden, and for good reason — Governor Hemera ran the colony.

Fuck.

"I didn't know that was her office. I swear, I ended up there entirely by accident. Look, it's a little complicated to explain, but my employer can vouch for my intentions."

The Governor's guard smirked. "Ah, yes, your *employer*. Lady Isha, right? We keep track of all new arrivals to our little world, so we know who is here, and why. Once I'd verified your identity, I called her — do you want to know how that particular conversation went?"

Fuck fuck fuckety fuckadoodle-fuckingdoo.

"As soon as I told her that you were in jail, she said she didn't know you, and hung up."

Asshole.

Jade knew that she only had one move. She had trespassed on the carefully protected workspace of the most important person on the planet, with no Eris to prove that she was there for a good reason, and no employer to back her up.

She started to cry.

Sob, really. Men never knew what to do when a woman started crying in front of them, and being underestimated is a girl's best friend.

"Huh. Uhm — er — hey, no, look, it's okay, why don't you take a breath, uhh — let me get you some water — "

The guard was out of the room so fast he banged his leg into the doorframe on his way out. Before Jade could try to think of a way out of this — before she'd even had time to wipe her eyes — the guard returned, another man in tow. This one was well-dressed and had the manner of a government agent; Palace Guard, maybe? Or the secret services — but which *one*?

He stood imposingly in front of her, motioning the guard to leave. Once the door was closed, he removed her cuffs and leaned back.

"We've been watching you for some time. Keeping tabs. We think you'd be a useful addition to our agency, if you want to work for us. It'll get you out of this situation you've found yourself in."

Jade narrowed her eyes. "What's the job?"

The agent retrieved a badge from inside his jacket, passing it over to her. *No. Way.* "Have you ever wanted to work for the Watch?"

Jade's wide grin was all the answer he needed.

Fragments
Hilda

By Gale Heimeldat
Edited by Theta Mandel

"I can't access any more data in the designated system," chirped Klo. "You may recall that I already determined this fact thirteen days ago."

"It never hurts to double check," said Hilda as she disconnected the small bot from her terminal and stared down at the data Klo had managed to dig up.

Four years of investigation, laid out in columns of glowing blue text, barely covered the surface of her desk. Objectively, it was a rather pitiful quantity of information, but given the difficulties Hilda had faced in getting this far, she thought she'd recovered an impressive amount.

"But it's not enough, is it?" she sighed.

"Vague word usage," Klo trilled. "Enough for what purpose?"

"Enough to find them."

Klo's processors hummed rapidly. "Clarify the antecedent of that pronoun?"

"I wish I could," Hilda muttered.

Her eyes moved slowly back and forth across the data columns, even though she knew there was nothing more to learn. She'd arranged and rearranged the fragments of information using every classification system, extrapolation program, and cross-referencing engine she could find, and none of it had gotten her any closer to finding answers.

Someone was missing. That was all she knew for sure, even after four years of digging. The lack of knowledge felt like a gaping hole inside her. Her life felt so… *empty*. Like the framework of a building without any walls. But someone used to fill that framework. Maybe a sibling or a best friend? Maybe a lover? No, Hilda wasn't the sort to have a *lover;* they would have been a spouse.

The point was, she didn't know. Someone had erased an important presence from her life. She'd spent the past two hundred dull, pointless years as an accountant without ever realising something was wrong. Not that there was anything wrong with accounting, but there was nothing *else* to her life. Just numbers. Someone had scraped out all the interesting details and left her with

nothing but a mindless routine of work and sleep and occasional bland outings to overpriced shops.

And, while she'd never been a particularly brave or combative person, Hilda couldn't bear the thought of someone meddling with her memories or her timeline to make her *boring*. She had to do something about it. She had to find whoever had fallen out of her life.

"They must still exist somewhere," Hilda murmured. The columns of glowing information burned into her retinas until she leaned back and rubbed her eyes. Blotchy orange afterimages typed themselves across the insides of her eyelids. "If they'd been completely erased from the timestream, there wouldn't be any traces left behind."

"This is the seventh time you've repeated the same conclusion," Klo informed her.

Hilda opened one eye far enough to glance at the little bot. It didn't look like much: just a conical metal body with a scanner head on top and several arms tipped with interface plugs for different types of computers. It sat beside her terminal like a piece of abstract desk art.

"Repeating myself helps me think," Hilda said.

"That's an unsubstantiated claim," cheeped Klo.

The bot was a ridiculous little contraption. It had started out as a fraud checker, a low-intellect AI that saved Hilda a great deal of effort in her accounting work. It could run hundreds of calculations simultaneously and, unlike a standard computer, it was fairly good at recognising the difference between mathematical errors and fraudulent activity.

In fact, it was Klo that had first noticed the small discrepancies: census lists that didn't match up with weaving records, tax history that implied the existence of a family member who didn't exist, a graduating Archon class of seventy-three students that submitted a receipt for holo-printing seventy-four diplomas.

"I couldn't have gotten this far without you, Klo," said Hilda.

"I've done my best," Klo chirped.

"Better than your best, really," Hilda said.

She'd never been much good with bots, but determination was an excellent tutor. Over the past few years, she'd gradually improved Klo's analytical skills and installed a few questionably obtained security bypass routines to let the little bot wriggle its way into secure servers and download private records. Along the way, the bot had somehow acquired the habit of correcting her grammar.

"I never thought I'd get sentimental about a fraud checker," said Hilda, "but I think I'll miss you."

"Do you intend for me to stop assisting you?"

"In a way."

Hilda had been planning this for a while. They'd run out of places to look for more clues, and it had been weeks since Klo found anything new. A good accountant checked everything twice, so she'd set Klo combing back through the systems they'd already raided, but as expected, it had come up blank.

Which meant it was time for Plan B. Or perhaps she should call it Plan D, for Daunting. If nobody else knew about her missing person, the Watch would. The Watch knew everything. And, as it happened, they were hiring analysts for their tracking and retrievals department.

As far as Hilda could tell, that sort of analysis wasn't terribly different from combing through hundreds of thousands of numbers in search of suspicious patterns. She could do the job.

But — but she was an *accountant*. Even other accountants described her with adjectives like 'frumpy' and 'predictable'. She shared her apartment with a fish and two potted plants. She ordered an identical list of groceries every week and bought all her clothes at the same shop. Would the Watch really consider hiring someone so… mundane?

Well, she'd never know unless she tried. Hilda took a deep breath and made an effort to straighten her shoulders. She had dreadful posture after two centuries working at a desk terminal. She swiped her painstakingly gathered clues off the desk screen and pulled up the Watch application form.

"It's just paperwork," she said. "I'm quite good at paperwork."

"Confirmed," chirped Klo.

"Right, then."

Hilda activated her keyboard and started rapidly filling out the application. She'd read through it a dozen times before and mentally composed and edited her answer to every question. Before she knew it, she was finished. She moved her hand automatically to the 'submit' option, then froze.

Was she really doing this? A woman whose idea of 'daring' was eating at a new restaurant — a woman whose most thrilling memory in the past fifty years was the day 'Gramps' Sallivar dropped dead during a budget meeting and metamorphosed into a well-endowed young woman — trying to join the Watch with the intent of accessing redacted time-data?

"I was just as nervous the first time I linked you to a restricted system," she told Klo.

"Incomplete comparative," Klo informed her. "As nervous as what?"

"I didn't back down then, and I won't now," Hilda said firmly. "I might be boring, but I'm *not* cowardly!" She pressed her finger down firmly on the 'submit' option, then let out a shaky breath. "There!"

"The application has been received by the Watch computer system," trilled Klo. "Would you like me to —"

"No!" said Hilda, snatching at Klo's interface arms. "Don't go anywhere near the Watch systems. You'd set off a dozen alarms. In fact, it's time for you to deactivate, please."

"Deactivating," agreed Klo. The faint hum of the bot's processors faded, and the lights on its scanner head blinked out.

Hilda unscrewed the bot's access port and carefully pulled out its data storage chip. The tiny hard drive fit neatly into the antique locket around her neck. She'd begun wearing the locket several months ago so that its sudden appearance wouldn't coincide with her change of career. Perhaps that was over-cautious, but this was the *Watch* she was dealing with. Better to overthink things than to make a silly mistake.

The bot's semi-legal and not-at-all legal upgrade chips went into the waste disposal. It was only meant to disintegrate organic matter, but a couple disposal cycles still managed to reduce the computer chips to unrecognisable bits of slag. Hilda dropped them in the non-organic waste chute, then reinstalled Klo's original data chip and powered up the bot again.

"KL anti-fraud analysis system initialising," chirped Klo.

"Hello again," said Hilda.

"Please connect this unit to a records system or aim scanner head at a numerical holo-spread to initialise anti-fraud analysis."

"Enter standby mode," sighed Hilda.

"Standing by."

It wasn't as though Klo's upgrades had given it *that* much personality, but all the same, Hilda would miss talking to the little bot. Ah, well. If everything went well, Hilda would end up with someone more interesting and *far* more important than an upgraded fraud checker.

She gripped the locket that held all her fragmentary clues and scraps of evidence. All that was left of her best friend, or her family, or her spouse. Whoever they were, whatever they once did to fill the empty dullness of her life…

"I'm coming," said Hilda softly. "You'll have to be patient. I need to be very careful about this. But I'll find you. If it takes me a thousand years, I'll find out who erased you from my life and I'll get you back."

Changes
Cyrin

By Molly Warton
Edited by Theta Mandel

Outside existence, ephemeral reality, in the unknown liminal land beyond the universe, lay a world toppled by Time's turning treadmills. Witchcraft and wizardry and wheedling bureaucracy long since forgotten, here lay the former gods of time, the Archons, the Angels, the fallen rulers of creation. No more the stagnancy, the stale, stunted society, the endless aeons of mind-numbing, repetitious, redundant, rhythmic rituals. This was a broken place.

When you've lost the Revolution, and have been cast from your pretty little pedestal in the heavens to the dank dark earth below, you have to change. Nobody said you have to change for the better.

You weren't supposed to go out at night. *Things* lurked out there in the darkness, so they said, in amongst the shattered, swirling spires and the downtrodden, dented domes, demons and monsters and terrible beasts called *Akhzapa'a* — not that anyone was quite sure what *Akhzapa'a* actually *were*. The Cathedral of Time was shrouded in silence, muted by the night's amber embrace. The bells were silent, as always; the only sound was that of someone softly sobbing in a corridor. They sat in the silken shadows coating the cold marble floor, knees pressed deep into their chest in a futile attempt to stymie the aching emanating from within. Arms wrapped tight about their body, tighter, tighter, tighter, pressing in as if it would somehow stop the hurt.

Why did I come here? Cyrin wondered in the quiet of their mind. They knew visiting this place served only to resuscitate memories they longed to forget, yet here they were. The memories came rushing back as the space around them opened the floodgates of their mind.

Cyrin hurried along the seemingly endless corridor. They cast furtive glances from side to side, though they knew it was quite safe. Nobody else dared venture into the corridors at night, scared of shadows of devils that haunted their minds. Even the shadows seemed to cling to the floor in terror of what might be lurking in the corners. But not Cyrin. They had a purpose, and each cold titillating scent of the night spurred them on to the place where they knew he was waiting.

"Cyrin," whispered Nadro, stepping out of the shadows.

Oh, sweet night, gentle night! How lovely it was to see that face again, the only face that had ever cared, said they were worth it, said how much he loved them. Cyrin sunk into Nadro's arms. They breathed in his scent and bathed in the warmth of his body.

"I love you," they said, as they reached up to Nadro's mouth and leant in to kiss it.

He said nothing, but took the kiss and held it, and reached out with his eternal self. On the ethereal plane of the conscious and the subconscious and the minds of the gods hung two great shimmering souls, intricate and delicate, with myriads of unknowable facets and colours and such incredible beauty, the depth of which was incomprehensible to any mortal soul. They were at once shapeless and formless and infinite and intricate, an impossibility of existence.

This was another world, where the souls sang together, sang a wonderful song that babbled as the rushing rocky brook, and harmonised in a manner so melodious that should the mortal mind perceive it for even a single second it would at once be overcome with raptures so intensely delightful, so incomprehensibly beautiful, that they should expire on the spot and succumb to death's inexorable grasp. The souls were dancing, moving slowly together in time to no particular tune but the melodies of existence that exist on the edge of perception, and the feeling of two souls mingling so that the two minds are almost joined to one another is completely unlike any mental or physical experience that you or I can undergo.

Two hearts, two souls, two minds, closer and closer to one. Cyrin fell deep, deep into the soul of Nadro, a beautiful shimmering wonder, kind and thoughtful and —

There was a knife.

And Cyrin reached the innermost part of Nadro's mind, around all the collected fake niceties that he observed, day in, day out, day in, day out, and it was…

Imagine, if you will, a plate encrusted with food. It has been left sitting for what may as well be an eternity, and the mould has grown upon it, swarming like an immensity of ants, and upon that mould more mould has grown, until the plate is fully encrusted, ensnared, coated with creeping dark dirty mould. This was what the inside of Nadro's soul was like.

Cyrin breathed quickly, hyperventilating as the knife drew nearer to their body, and the words of Nadro echoed about their mind, reaching into every corner and cranny, filling it with venomous, spittly thoughts.

"You have no idea," said Nadro, "How long I have wanted to do this. To see you squirm beneath me like the wretch you are. You were so annoying. Did you really believe I was in love with you? Fool. It would almost be sweet, were you not so infuriatingly irritating. It's not anything personal, you understand. Well, it wasn't to begin with. It's only that you are, unfortunately, in the way of my promotion. That's not to say, of course," and the voice got lower and crueller, "that I shan't enjoy this."

The words bit deep into Cyrin as the knife, now pressed to their throat, surely would. The metal was cold against their skin, a hand reaching out to constrict the green fuse of life. And in the eternal realm, a shadow-knife to the soul of Cyrin. As above, so below. A slice, and pain, intense and incredible, such that it almost transcended that name and became something else, and Cyrin couldn't breathe, they couldn't breathe, they couldn't —

Nadro walked away, and Cyrin's mortal form lay dead upon the floor, soul spilling out of the sides, and in an instant a new form there lay, pristine and perfect in form and intellect. But in their soul lay a wound from the shadow of the knife, and that wound would not heal so easily.

Cyrin remembered awakening, of the fear of the night, of the tales of disappearances that all of a sudden didn't seem so trivial. And the hurt. The hurt would not go away, however much they tried to suppress it. There was nobody to talk to, nobody to go to. They were all alone. Quite, quite alone.

"Hey," said a voice from behind them.

Cyrin jumped, startled.

"I — I didn't think there was anyone there," they said. They turned around, and were confronted with the face of Jillian, who they knew a little from various social functions.

"Looks like you need a change," she said.

Old Gods

Jill

By Aristide Twain
Edited by Theta Mandel & Molly Warton

Ten seconds. The water was cold, and muddy. It would have been alright, he thought, to be drowned in crystal-clear waters, like those of the Time Sea back home. There would have been something dignified about that. This river, however, was full of silt and weeds and tadpoles, and he couldn't see further than arm's length. Not that he had arms to extend, bound, as they were, with crude rope behind a rough-hewn piece of woodwork. *Oh, dear.*

Twenty seconds. Perhaps he'd misunderstood, perhaps they'd let him up at any moment. He'd read up on this period, whatever his later mistakes; before it became used in witch-hunts, the ducking stool had been a means of simple, harmless humiliation, inflicted on the rowdy and the licentious as a kind of ridicule. Surely that was it; surely the locals had found his tricks *annoying*, and the accusations of satanic allegiance were meant in jest. He was perfectly safe. Must be.

Thirty seconds. The really difficult thing was remembering not to hold his breath. He knew the logic of this test: he who came up unharmed from the ducking was a proven witch. Surviving would be trivial if he cared to attempt it, but it would only bring more complications; cremation was not as easy to survive as drowning. Better to die now, and be reborn later. Better to open his lungs and let the foul, bitter stuff choke him. But that was easier said than done.

Sixty seconds. He really ought to be giving in by now. Trained humans could survive for two minutes, but a panicking old man, accused of witchcraft and sentenced to the ducking stool, would be unlikely to last that long. *Come on.* It should have been easy. Just pry those tissues open, in defiance of every scrap of instinct. Just let himself die. *It's only a body, only a body* —

And then the water was gone in a splash.

Not a *flash* — a very distinct splash, as would occur if the river's banks had suddenly disappeared on either side, causing the unsupported water to collapse downward into a gigantic puddle. A moment later, he realised that this was more or less what had occurred, albeit at the lower scale of a cube's worth of water, the volume which had directly surrounded him and the ducking-stool. Though

he was still bound to it, the deadly chair had been severed neatly from the rest of the contraption.

It didn't take long for a fully qualified Agent of Providence to realise what had occurred: a timeship had been materialised around him at the fateful moment, rescuing him from his watery grave. His vision was still blurry from his recent immersion, but the painful white glare of an undecorated flight deck still stung his eyes. He spat out a mouthful of river-water, choking, and took in a few liberating gulps of air, blinking rapidly as his eyes readjusted to dryness and light and safety.

Opposite him stood a woman with a hooked nose and a long mane of dark, curly hair. As if there had been any doubt about her status as a fellow traveller in Space and Time, the subtle tan of her skin definitively set her apart from the local humans of this era — and certainly, no woman would have been caught dead out there with nails filed to claw-like points, unless they had a desperate hankering to try out his present seat. In truth, his saviour was unlikely to be human; he recognised the cut of her short tunic, the kind of simple, practical outfit favoured back home by the technically-inclined.

The uniform grey fabric, however, seemed to flout every conventional dress code. No House crest, nor any mark of caste; and certainly the stranger's dress was quite unlike the maroon outfits favoured by Watchers like himself, Providential as the intervention might have seemed. That left a Renegade, or the agent of some other covert power; struck with a renewed fear, he prayed to the Minds that he hadn't fallen into the hands of the Subtraction.

"Identify yourself," he called out, attempting to sound as authoritative as a man can do while sopping wet and bound securely to a big wooden chair.

"Witches first," said the stranger, with a hint of a smirk. Her eyes weren't on him; she was idly checking some readings on her vessel's control panel, supremely confident that her guest could pose no threat.

"I am *not* a witch!" he declared. "Those excitable peasants got *entirely* the wrong idea."

"And whose fault was that?" the woman retorted, turning to face him. "I said *identify*."

"My name is Mylos," he replied. "As for my allegiance, it is none of your concern — at least, not until you apprise me of yours."

His taunt was met with a chuckle from the woman, and Mylos half-regretted his hostility. Now she ambled towards him, still exuding calmness and security, as well a pilot might on the deck of her own Ship. But to his surprise, he found no genuine malice behind her smile; mischief, at most, and even then, it was almost guilty, as if the woman were of two minds about allowing herself a moment's amusement when there was work to be done. There were rings of sleep deprivation under her eyes; he hadn't seen that clearly, before.

"Agent Mylos," she repeated, in the tone of one who had been reminded of a name they knew quite well. "You've been here a long, long while, haven't you?"

"I… was assigned to this planet as a Watcher some local centuries ago, yes," he admitted. "I confess I found the early going less strenuous. The closer we get to their 18th century, the more… anomalies there are to rectify."

"And you, of course, decided an era when Reason grew thin was the perfect time for a little light transmigration."

"Mere parlour tricks!"

"To us," she corrected him, one clawed finger raised. "Not to *them*. We aren't *like* them — don't forget that. Still, I don't blame you… Hundreds of cycles, eh? You probably don't even remember me."

Mylos frowned. *Remember*? Was this some old Academy friend who'd Fallen, turned renegade — or was she a compatriot in the Watch, a fellow Agent, after all? Tilting his head to one side, he tried to abstract away the grey tunic, the aura of command, and focused on the face, the voice, the *presence*.

"…*Jill!*" he breathed out in recognition, eliciting a smile from the long-haired woman. "Jillianxyeremos, Secretary to Shemhazai! After all those years… Why in Heaven are you *here*?!"

She shrugged, almost playfully. "Because you're in trouble."

"I — I daresay I could have managed," he demurred. "A few unpleasant minutes in that river, then waiting to be buried… I daresay I've rebuilt my body in close quarters before, a casket is nothing to me —"

"Yes, well. Quicker for everyone if I just saved you, don't you think?"

He frowned again. "But that's a waste of resources. The Boss would never sanction —"

"Oh, she doesn't need to," she interrupted. "Not anymore."

"What?"

"That's the other thing, Mylos," said the other Lightbringer. "Our kind, we're Angels… Agents of Providence. In the language of this time and place, that word, *angel*, it originally meant a *messenger*. And that, too, is what I'm doing here. Bringing you the good news. You and all the other field agents."

Though he thought he might come to trust Jill far more than he'd ever done Shemhazai, Mylos was almost afraid to ask. "W-what good news?"

Now, for the first time, there was something slightly dangerous in Jillian's smile.

"*I'm* in charge now."

* * *

"A nervous breakdown. Will people believe that?"

Pondrathin was lying in her lap, still shirtless — looking up at her with those big brown eyes. Jillian, still on edge even after that pleasant distraction, found it a comfort to run her long-nailed fingers through the younger deity's short, brown hair. It was a similar kind of

comfort to that which she felt when stroking Jupiter's smooth pink scales; she wondered what either being would have made of that comparison.

"Will people believe that a notoriously unstable, wildly overworked spymaster finally lost it?" she asked in reply, gaze distant. Her voice was slightly hoarse. "Let's face it, that's what we're all headed for. I may have only hastened the process. What I did —"

"I don't need to know," Prondrathin said quickly.

Jillian exhaled shakily. What had she done to deserve pir?

"Whatever you did," pe elaborated, "well… I'm sure she had it coming. And now you can make things better."

Jillian threw herself back on the soft, silk-covered mattress, lying back, so that her and her lover's half-naked bodies formed a cross. What would mortals think if they knew how those much-vaunted Agents of Divine Providence spent their free time, up here in the sky? Either way, Shemhazai had good taste in bedding, Jillian had to give her that.

"Yeah," she repeated, without conviction, with her eyes closed. "Make it all better."

* * *

"Hear us, O Lord! Grant thy children victory in the war against the heathen Frageni, and send thy mighty servants to ensure us a bountiful harvest!"

The High Priest of the Meligeni was a sight to behold. The native olive-green of his carapace was almost impossible to make out under the mass of sashes and beads which adorned it, and his head seemed thrice as big under the ceremonial headdress. The roaring of the crowd standing on the steps of the ziggurat filled his ears as he slowly lowered his pincers.

There was no sign, as yet, of the Lord of Hallowed Combat, but the High Priest knew he lay there, in the temple, somewhere behind that dark opening. If the supplications of his chosen people did not suffice to rouse him from his slumber, the scent of blood was sure to whet his appetite.

On the obsidian platform, the sacrifice was prepared. The teenaged Crown Prince of the Frageni, captured in battle, had been kept imprisoned until his natural shedding, and taken from his cell to the top of the ziggurat as soon as he crawled out of his old shell. His bare, blue-grey flesh quivered in the dry, hot air. He had been gagged, and his limbs, though impotent without their coating of sturdy chitin, had been tied to metal weights to make sure he couldn't wriggle off the sacrificial altar.

In this vulnerable state, without the forest-green carapace of the hated Frageni or the olive-green of the holy Meligeni, there was no way at all to tell the Prince apart from any other Santonin youth. The Priest tried not to let this bother him as he recited the words and raised the dagger —

— and then a goddess appeared, clad in tight-fitting grey.

"*Stop this at once*!" she commanded, and the Priest dropped the knife.

Though smaller, her visage was as strange and un-Santonin-like as that of the Lord of Combat. Her skin was a pinkish brown, her proportions warped and unfamiliar; she walked on two legs instead of four, and her pincers looked like anemones, though tipped with fine, painted claws. She was a third of the size of the Lord of Hallowed Combat, but still towered over the Priest; one good kick from her might have sent him flying off the platform and to his certain death.

"You," she spoke to the gaping Priest. "Untie that child and let him free."

"I — I —"

"*Now!*" the goddess thundered.

The Priest bowed his head and quickly picked up his blade, making short work of the Prince's bonds. Freed from the weights, the young Frageni threw himself off the altar with frantic clumsiness and then curled up in its shadow, the relative coolness a welcome respite from the torture of the baking sunlight.

"Alright, that's one thing. After I leave," she instructed the Priest, "you're to see him delivered back to his people, you understand? And broker *peace*. This

entire war is an anachronism, you're meant to be — oh, I shouldn't tell you. But do as I say, and demolish this ridiculous pyramid while you're at it. We'll have ways of keeping tabs on you."

"Y-yes, your divinity," said the High Priest, bowing again for lack of a better idea.

"Excellent. Now. Where *is* he?!"

"…W-where is *who*, your holiness?" he asked, raising his mandibles slightly.

The goddess moved her limbs in what the Priest somehow parsed as an expression of weary frustration, though it was quite unlike the body language of the Santonins.

"Oh, you probably know him by some ridiculous, self-styled title," she explained. "Not even a proper Vocational Name, I'll wager. Big fellow… Sort of… fearsome? Imagine biology like mine, reengineered in equal parts for warfare and for sheer intimidation. Scales, definitely, wings… Maybe lots of limbs. Probably breathes fire. Ringing any bells?"

The High Priest stood very still for a moment — then slowly, slowly pointed with a pincer towards the Sacred Gate and the darkness beyond.

"*Right!* Thank you," said the goddess as she stomped defiantly towards the forbidden entrance. "Honestly, I wonder why I bother. Bunch of cowboys… And the Boss stood for this kind of thing and dared to call herself an Archon — bloody — *hey*! You, in there! Are you listening!? Funtime's over!"

The Priest didn't dare follow the goddess in grey into the ziggurat; but his heaven-touched mind was in a trancelike state as he called upon all his sense and faculties, striving to remember every syllable, every detail of what was transpiring before his faceted eyes. A whole other codex, a brand-new holy book would have to be written; perhaps he and the Prince would work on it together.

The goddess's voice was muffled, now, but he could hear it, echoing from within, occasionally intercut with the familiar, roar-like rumbles of the Lord of Hallowed Combat.

"*…Cosmic War is over, for crying out l… body's not regulation… do you think you are… direct contravention of… wanted to stay a spineless…*"

Only when the curse words started flying did the High Priest respectfully step back, turning to face the silent, waiting crowd with a rapidly sinking heart.

There was a lot to explain, and somehow, he didn't think he'd ever get the answers. Nor, for that matter, that he'd like them if he could find them.

* * *

She kept all of Jupiter's shed skins. Space was no issue to a being like her, and she liked to hang on to those records of her little friend's past life.

She knew, of course, that a snake's sheddings weren't true regeneration, even if that snake's biology had been severely reengineered by unscrupulous biologists. Her pet kept the same form and the same genetics; all that a shedding heralded was an alteration in size. And Jupiter didn't grow very fast. It would be decades yet before it became possible for the affectionate pink serpent to wrap itself around her forearm; decades more before it became too heavy to carry.

Still, it marked the time they'd spent together, like the rings of a tree. A silly little habit. Fine for a secretary; since she'd become Chair of the Watch Station, she'd made more of a secret of it. Sensitivity was a weakness too easily exploited; the last thing she wanted was for someone to steal her little collection or destroy it as some manner of power play. The sad thing was that, blackmail-wise, it would work, if anything did — anything short of threatening someone's life, anyway. She would still place the lives of Jupiter or Prondrathin, or, really, those of all her Watchers, over anything else.

Even her own.

Sometimes she dreamt of one more skin in that little, dimensionally-transcendental cabinet. Light brown skin, shoulder-length hair the colour of hazelnuts. She pictured the First Jillian, hollowed, dried, and hung on display, just for her. Humans would have thought it a nightmare,

but then, they were a species who thought of snakes as vermin on principle. To Jillian it was a fantasy. Those carefree days before graduation seemed so, so far away… Some keepsake, some remnant of that happy girl would have meant the world. Sometimes it was hard to remember she'd had a life before this one — before the Station, and Shemhazai, and the world on her shoulders. And all those difficult choices.

At least she had Jupiter. At least she had Prondrathin.

If only she had the time to love them.

* * *

"Get off me! Get *off*!"

One thing she'd never had to deal with as Shemhazai's Secretary was combat. Not that it befit a Watch Chair, either, in principle; but every new stop on what she had initially thought of as her *inspection* tour confirmed the necessity of the hands-on approach she'd decided to take in her reform of the Watch. If her shadowy superiors disapproved, well, they could start by giving her some tangible proof of their very existence, and *then* she'd talk.

She'd learnt to fence at the Academy, of course, just as she'd learnt and practised every other skill which Cathedral society held to possess that quintessential quality they called *refinement*. But she'd learnt it as an art, a kind of high-stakes dancing where elegance trumped efficiency; anyone base enough to take advantage of a grace-mandated opening in one's defence was not worth fencing with, and should simply be dematerialised for the betterment of the Cosmos. That was how her instructor had put it.

Some entities, however, were easier to dematerialise than others, particularly when you were currently fighting for your life. The reanimated corpse — barely more than a skeleton wrapped in leathery skin — had no sword; it attacked with its teeth and its claws and a blunt, wooden cosh. It was light, but *tough*, and the blank look in its glazed, sunken eyes had no bearing on the speed and ferocity with which it chased her through the foggy streets as copper rockets zoomed overhead, hazy brown shapes in the smoke-covered sky.

Jillian wasn't seriously wounded, but it had struck her once in her side with the cosh, and its black, sharpened nails had nicked her a few times — once on the leg, once on her hip, and once on her forearm. All three cuts were bleeding, flecks of red staining the cobblestones as she ran. Her grey uniform would be needing a replacement — what luck. Brand new it had been, too! The prototype of the new style she'd introduced, shorn of the needlessly conspicuous crimson the Boss had favoured. Oh well.

However bad she looked, her assailant looked worse. The clothes with which it had been buried had long been reduced to a few, tattered shreds; its Mark of Animation burned a fiery red in the middle of its exposed chest, whose ribs begged for a xylophone player. The zombie looked scrawny, almost comical. Until it bit your face off, anyway.

Jillian didn't want to destroy it. Bury it, maybe, but the old bastard had suffered enough, what little was left of him. Still, needs must. The creature wouldn't *stop*, and she hadn't the equipment to free it from its cursed half-life, nor lay it to rest.

Seeing her chance, Jillian *leapt*, with a Lightbringer's speed, across the road. The lumbering, steam-powered cart missed her by an inch; it slammed right into the zombie, whose limbs went flying with a simple, dry crunch. It uttered no cry, gave no reaction as it finally died. On a patch of dry grey leather, as it flew off into the smoggy skies of Lancaster Station, a red sigil faded.

Jillian stopped, leaning against a lamppost, and finally caught her breath.

It didn't surprise her overmuch when a very-much-living wail pierced her eardrums.

"*Mr BONES!…*"

The rogue Watcher emerged from the shadows, staggering with grief. She was almost amused to see he was wearing the standard maroon uniform, albeit with a heavy black overcoat and broad-brimmed hat in some vague concession to the local style. If that was how seriously the typical veteran Agent took the necessity

of dressing for the occasion, she'd been all too right to introduce the new grey suits.

"You — you killed Mr Bones!" the stricken Archon blubbered, lunging at her. "I'll — I'll —"

"Agent Matreson," she told him, voice clipped and poise impeccable despite her wounds and the tears in her clothing, "we both know that if you had any combat abilities whatsoever, you wouldn't have felt the need to hang on to a reanimated thrall *long* after the Watch code was updated to ban their use. To ban their use in, might I add, the most emphatic and specific terms."

"O-oh," the red-headed man stammered as he realised he was addressing a superior, and not the alien intruder on whom he'd thought he'd sicced his pet. "I, uhm." He frowned. "Look, the Boss doesn't mind —"

"The Boss isn't your boss anymore," Jill informed him, finding yet another way to put the message she'd now carried to two dozen varyingly-compliant Watchers on as many planets. "*I* am. And *I* mind."

"I see," said Matreson. He adjusted his coat. "Look, I didn't mean… It was only a harmless bit of — I mean, I haven't created any *more* of them since the end of the War. I just thought…" He frowned, with just a hint of defiance. "You don't seem to realise how dangerous some of these postings are…"

Jillian — blood-stained, panting, sweaty Jillian, leaning against her lamppost — gave him the most withering look she could manage.

"*You think?!*" she said, just after she saw in his eyes that he'd gotten the point. "Yes, I know. I do know how dangerous it is. I knew it wasn't safe before I ever came. Gang-dominated neo-industrialist human colony-station, so near to the Frontier… That's a killer. 'S why I didn't bring Jupiter. And I've read your file, I know you're low on life-force. But don't worry."

"*What*?" asked the snivelling, and, by now, considerably confused Agent.

Jillian's reply was simple; it was what she'd said to half the Agents of Providence she'd visited so far, always to the same awe-struck disbelief.

"I'm reassigning you."

Why was that so hard to believe? Why had these agents of salvation, left to fend for themselves, given up all hope of getting that same courtesy?

Oh, Shemhazai, Shemhazai, Shemhazai…

* * *

"If only I'd done it sooner…"

Jupiter was sunning itself by the great bay window. Once upon a time, the Boss had stood there, drunk on her own powerlust, but to the little pink snake, it was simply a great place for a nap, bathed in the golden light of the twin suns and the additional radiance reflected upwards by the shining, gold-red planet below.

How Jillian envied her companion its simple pleasures. Sitting at her desk, she clutched a stack of files. Agents of Providence. Zerlan. Mrellin. Nardeth. Once, her friends. Now…

Renegades?

"It wasn't an easy choice," Prondrathin said soothingly, looking over her shoulder. "You mustn't blame yourself."

Pe had just arrived, transmigrating up from the lower decks of the Station. She hadn't designed the new grey outfits with aesthetics in mind, but her lover rocked the look. Then again, pe'd pull anything off, in Jillian's opinion.

"But what do I do <u>now</u>?" she asked in a low moan. "They ran away. They're Renegades by definition. My duty… My duty as Watch Chair is to hunt them down. If I don't, and my superiors hear of it… I could lose command. Then this would all have been for nothing."

"<u>Whatever</u> happens," Prondrathin assured her, "it won't have been for nothing. You've been Chair of this Station for, what, two weeks? And look at all the good you've done already. The lives you've saved, the injustices you stopped —"

"But what about the injustices I'm making happen? I can't risk it all for just three rogue Lightbringers, but if I order them found and arrested, I'll be no better than the Boss. Abusing my power as I see fit. It's not fair! Now they're on their own, when — when if I'd been in charge a year ago, I could have helped them, could have helped them all…"

She gasped as Prondrathin swivelled her chair from underneath her, causing her to face pir. The younger Lightbringer cupped her cheeks with pir hands, and looked her in the eye.

"You don't have to do everything," pe assured them. "There are other Watcher Stations, aren't there? They can't all be run by assholes."

"We live in hope," she joked hollowly.

Damn information compartmentalisation. She didn't even know where the other six hundred and fourteen Stations were positioned, let alone how to contact their leaders. How frightening to think that those three fugitives onboard the Zadellin were at the mercy of these perfect strangers… Were they wise ministers of Archonic Providence, as she strove to be? Tinpot tyrants like Shemhazai? Something else altogether? There was no way to know.

"And as for the Zadellin crew," Prondrathin said slowly — "we have to trust… we have to trust that they aren't helpless. They aren't on their own. They're together. Friends, crewmates. They can help themselves. I hope."

The Watchers fell silent, and looked up at the stars.